The New Criterion

June 2002

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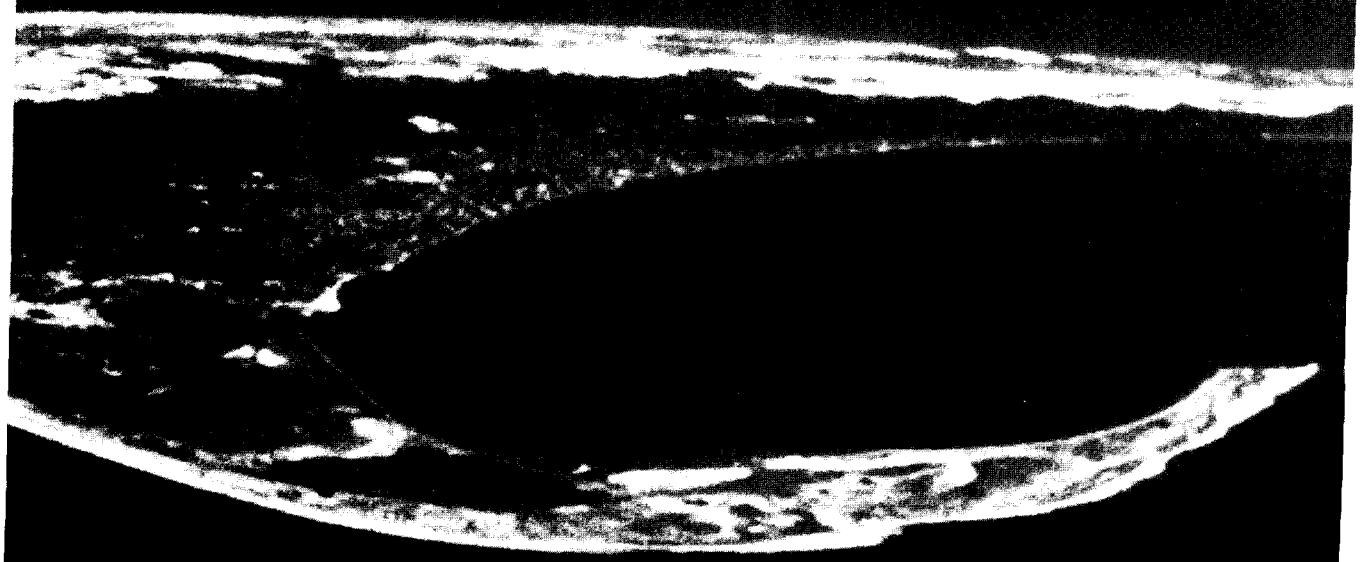

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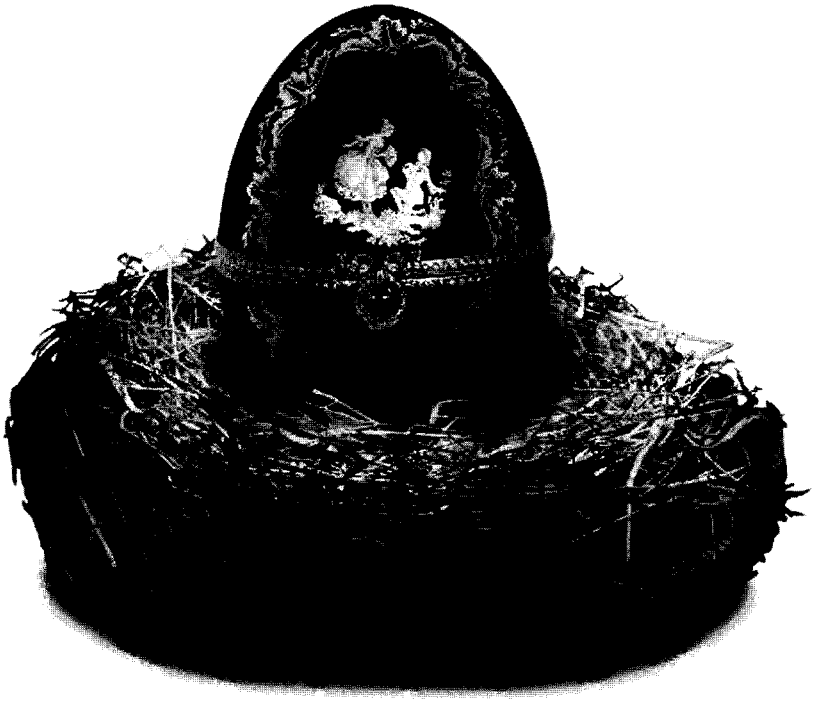

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Notes & Comments: June 2002

A note of thanks

With this issue, *The New Criterion* completes its twentieth year of publication. Twenty years is a significant anniversary for any magazine devoted to serious criticism of culture and the arts. For a magazine as outspoken and heterodox as *The New Criterion* has been, living through a twentieth birthday is almost a miracle.

We hasten to acknowledge that this achievement has been a collaborative effort. Indeed, it has been a collaboration of many hands. As with other magazines, the excellence of *The New Criterion* is inseparable from the excellence of its primary intellectual resource: its writers. From its very first issues, *The New Criterion* has been exceedingly fortunate in attracting distinguished literary talent. Some of that talent was already established and well known. Much of it was not. Many prominent figures on the critical landscape today first made their reputations in our pages, and we are proud to have nurtured so many young, untried writers. As we conclude this anniversary year, it seems appropriate to salute the many hands and minds that have helped fill our pages for two hundred issues. To all of them we owe a debt of thanks: together, they have made *The New Criterion* an informed, lively, and insightful repository of critical intelligence.

We know from our correspondence that what some readers find entertaining and informative, others find infuriating. We are grateful for both sorts of response. It has always been our aim to delight as well as instruct, and naturally we are pleased to have found a committed group of readers that shares our critical outlook. But we are also pleased by those readers who disagree with what we publish. Criticism aims not at unanimity but at informed debate, and if we have managed to spark disagreement and debate on contentious issues we know we are doing our job. A magazine—any cultural enterprise—is only as vital as its audience. We are grateful to you, our readers—both our friends and members of the loyal opposition—for helping to make *The New Criterion* one of the most important voices for serious criticism today.

Our writers have made *The New Criterion* eloquent and incisive; our readers have given currency to the ideas expressed in our pages. But *The New Criterion* could not exist without a third group of collaborators: our funders. Like almost all magazines devoted to high culture and serious criticism, *The New Criterion* operates at a considerable yearly deficit and is therefore structured as a tax-exempt entity. *The New Criterion* could never have been created without a group of visionary individuals that understood the intellectual and cultural potential of a magazine like *The New Criterion* and that was well placed to organize funding for the

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venture. We are profoundly grateful to this core group of individuals and to the institutions they represent for making *The New Criterion* possible. Their steadfast support allowed a daring experiment to become a respected standard-bearer for serious engagement with culture.

We are also profoundly grateful to those individuals who have lately rallied to our cause and have helped secure the future of *The New Criterion*. We wish to thank all those who have become Friends of *The New Criterion* and who are helping us prepare for the years ahead, especially Carol Selle and Donald Oresman, prime movers of the Friends. This is also the place to mention our special gratitude to another individual whose extraordinary help over the years has been indispensable to the survival of *The New Criterion*. We mean Donald Kahn, a lover and supporter of classical music and high culture whose generosity to *The New Criterion*—and to other worthy institutions—has been exemplary. A magazine like *The New Criterion* only makes sense if it has the freedom of critical independence. Mr. Kahn has done a great deal to secure that freedom. We are immensely grateful for his friendship and generosity.

Conservatives need not apply

In our March issue, we reported in this space on some for-credit courses on offer at the University of California at Berkeley. There was a course in Blackjack, for students who hadn't yet learned how to handle cards, and "Copwatch," an important scholarly offering that, according to one description, advises students "how to safely and effectively assert their rights when interacting with the police." The *pièce de résistance*, however, was a women's studies course in male sexuality in which students visited strip clubs, wrote papers about their sexual fantasies, and watched an instructor having sex.

Well, that was March. When the story about the sex class made the national headlines, embarrassed university officials closed down the course, or at least changed its name. Now Berkeley is back with another educational opportunity. In their on-line catalogue for fall 2002, one finds a class—in the English department, no less—called "The Politics and Poetics of Palestinian Resistance." Here is the original course description for the class:

> Since the inception of the Intifada in September of 2000, Palestinians have been fighting for their right to exist. The brutal Israeli military occupation of Palestine, an occupation that has been ongoing since 1948, has systematically displaced, killed, and maimed millions of Palestinian people. And yet, from under the brutal weight of the occupation, Palestinians have produced their own culture and poetry of resistance. This class will examine the history of the Palestinian resistance and the way that it is narrated by Palestinians in order to produce an understanding of the Intifada and to develop a coherent political analysis of the situation. This class takes as its starting point the right of Palestinians to fight for their own self-determination. Conservative thinkers are encouraged to seek other sections.

Nice stuff, no? What's such a blatant exercise in political incitement doing under the rubric of English? Well might you ask. You might also ask why gross historical falsehoods are allowed to stand in an official course description at one of America's premier universities. But perhaps the most outrageous thing in this specimen of partisan politics masquerading as academic study is the closing advisory: No conservatives need apply. We all know that "diversity" is the mantra of the month in American higher education. And here we have a splendid example of exactly what academics mean when they celebrate diversity: they mean they will defend to the death your right to think Left—to think, that is, exactly as they do.

When news of this course made the national press, Berkeley administrators once

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again went into apologetic overdrive, mumbling about a "failure of oversight" and dispensing a few clichés about the importance of "controversy" and keeping the classroom free from "indoctrination." For its part, the English department excised from the course description the concluding sentence advising conservatives to go elsewhere but otherwise left that noxious piece of political propaganda intact. Snehal Shingavi, the teacher responsible for "The Politics and Poetics of Palestinian Resistance," explained in an interview that by "conservative thinkers" he did not really mean, well, conservative thinkers but rather thinkers whose views were "limited or narrow in scope." Right. And when we call Mr. Pickwick "a humbug," we mean it not in the ordinary sense of the word, but in the exalted Pickwickian sense.

In some ways, Mr. Shingavi's response to his critics was even more disturbing than his advertised effort to discriminate against students who did not share his political views. Explaining why he wished to exclude "conservative thinkers," he said, "If you can't accept that Palestinians have the right to self-determination, it is impossible to read resistance poetry." Really? By that logic you would have to be an English royalist to read Dryden, a conservative Catholic to read Dante, a radical Puritan to read Milton. It used to be that one read literature to broaden one's horizons. At Berkeley, it seems, one reads literature to reinforce one's political loyalties.

Officials at Berkeley doubtless hope that by removing the explicit prohibition against students with conservative views they will silence their critics. And perhaps they will. But the problem with "The Politics and Poetics of Palestinian Resistance" was not just its exclusion of students with conservative politics: the problem is rather its blatant injection of politics into the humanities curriculum. It doesn't matter whether Mr. Shingavi allows conservative students into his political rally; he shouldn't be allowed to peddle that rally as a college English class.

In fact, though, politics is the name of the game in humanities courses at Berkeley, as it is at so many American colleges and universities. The politics does not always sound as if it were scripted by Hamas. There's plenty of feminist, anti-American, anti-Western politics, too. When you're done screaming about Israel, you can beat up on Britain in "Revisions of Empire," which deals with the "British empire in the nineteenth-century, and the legacy of the violence of imperialism." (What about the good things British imperialism brought—civilization, literacy, the rule of law, improved hygiene, education, technology, and the end to barbaric customs like suttee? Somehow we rather doubt this class will dwell on that side of the story.) You can also take time out to indulge in some feminist histrionics in "female subjects: an exploration of harm" (lower-case in the original), by reading "coming-of-age stories scored by sexual violence, racked [sic] by the dictates of beauty, scarred by what it takes to become 'American feminine.'" And you won't want to miss "US Prison Narratives," in which you can sift through "the way captive narration interrogates liberal tenants [sic] such as 'progress,' 'freedom,' 'democracy'"—note the scare quotes—and ponder questions like "What is 'crime' in the US context. . . ?" and "What institutional apparatuses inform America's current status as the most incarcerating nation in the history of humankind?"

This list could easily be extended. And it could easily be broadened with kindred offerings from other departments. But why go on? The University of California at Berkeley is one of the most glittering jewels in the diadem of American higher education. Its wholesale embrace of the pomo, left-wing, antinomian agenda is a scandal and a disgrace.

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The survival of culture: X

The fortunes of permanence

by Roger Kimball

Do not be proud of the fact that your grandmother was shocked at something which you are accustomed to seeing or hearing without being shocked . . . . It may be that your grandmother was an extremely lively and vital animal, and that you are a paralytic.
—G. K. Chesterton, *As I Was Saying*

How but in custom and in ceremony
Are innocence and beauty born?
Ceremony's a name for the rich horn,
And custom the spreading laurel tree.
—W. B. Yeats, "A Prayer For My Daughter"

"Seven and a half hours of mild, unexhausting labour, and then the soma *ration and games and unrestricted copulation and the feelies. What more can they ask for?"*
—Mustapha Mond in Huxley's *Brave New World*

I remember the first time I noticed the legend "cultural instructions" on the brochure that accompanied some seedlings. "How quaint," I thought, as I pursued the advisory: this much water and that much sun, certain tips about fertilizer, soil, and drainage. Planting one sort of flower nearby keeps the bugs away but proximity to another sort makes bad things happen. Young shoots might need stakes, and watch out for beetles, weeds, and unseasonable frosts . . .

The more I pondered it, the less quaint, the more profound, those cultural instructions seemed. I suppose I had once known that the word "culture" comes from the capacious Latin verb "*colo*," which means everything from "live, dwell, inhabit," to "observe a religious rite" (whence our word "cult"), "care, tend, nurture," and "promote the growth or advancement of." I never thought much about it.

I should have. There is a lot of wisdom in etymology. The noun "*cultura*" (which derives from *colo*) means first of all "the tilling or cultivation of land" and "the care or cultivation of plants." But it, too, has ambitious tentacles: "the observance of a religious rite," "well groomed" (of hair), "smart" (of someone's appearance), "chic, polished, sophisticated" (of a literary or intellectual style).

It was Cicero, in a famous passage of the *Tusculan Disputations*, who gave currency to the metaphor of culture as a specifically intellectual pursuit. "Just as a field, however good the ground, cannot be productive without cultivation, so the soul cannot be productive without education." Philosophy, he said, is a sort of "*cultura animi*," a cultivation of the mind or spirit: "it pulls out vices by the roots," "makes souls fit for the reception of seed," and sows in order to bring forth "the richest fruit." But even the best care, he warned, does not inevitably bring good results: the influence of education, of *cultura animi*, "cannot be the same for all: its effect is great when it has secured a hold upon a character suited to it." The results of cultivation depend not only on

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the quality of the care but the inherent nature of the thing being cultivated. How much of what Cicero said do we still understand?

In current parlance, "culture" (in addition to its use as a biological term) has both a descriptive and an evaluative meaning. In its anthropological sense, "culture" is neutral.

Culture survives and develops under the aegis of permanence. Instantaneity—the enemy of permanence—is one of the chief imperatives of our time. It renders anything lasting, anything inherited, suspicious by definition.

It describes the habits and customs of a particular population: what they do, not what they should do. Its task is to inventory, to docket, not judge.

But we also speak of "high culture," meaning not just social practices but a world of artistic, intellectual, and moral endeavor in which the notion of hierarchy, of a rank-ordering of accomplishment, is integral. (More etymology: "hierarchy" derives from words meaning "sacred order." Egalitarians are opposed to hierarchies in principle; what does that tell us about egalitarianism?) Culture in the evaluative sense does not merely admit, it requires judgment as a kind of coefficient or auxiliary: comparison, discrimination, evaluation are its lifeblood. "We never really get near a book," Henry James remarked in an essay on American letters, "save on the question of its being good or bad, of its really treating, that is, or not treating, its subject." It was for the sake of culture in this sense that Matthew Arnold extolled criticism as "the disinterested endeavour to learn and propagate the best that is known and thought in the world."

It is of course culture in the Arnoldian sense that we have primarily in view when we speak of "the survival of culture." And it is the fate of culture in this sense that I will be chiefly concerned with in this essay. But it would be foolish to draw too firm a distinction between the realms of culture. There is much confluence and interchange between them. Ultimately, they exist symbiotically, nurturing, supplementing, contending with each other. The manners, habits, rituals, institutions, and patterns of behavior that define culture for the anthropologist provide the sediment, the ground out of which culture in the Arnoldian sense takes root—or fails to take root. Failure or degradation in one area instigates failure or degradation in the other.

The problem with metaphors is not that they are false but that they do not tell the whole truth. The organic image of culture we have inherited from Cicero is illuminating. Among other things, it reminds us that we do not exist as self-sufficient atoms but have our place in a continuum that stretches before and after us in time. Like other metaphors, however, it can be elevated into an absurdity if it is pushed too far. Oswald Spengler's sprawling, two-volume lament, *The Decline of the West*, is a good illustration of what happens when genius is captivated by a metaphor. Spengler's book, published in the immediate aftermath of World War I, epitomized the end-of-everything mood of the times and was hailed as the brilliant key to understanding—well, just about everything. And Spengler really is brilliant. For example, his remarks about how the triumph of scepticism breeds a "second religiousness" in which "men dispense with proof, desire only to believe and not to dissect," have great pertinence to an age, like ours, that is awash in new-age spiritual counterfeits. Nevertheless, Spengler's deterministic allegiance to the analogy between civilizations and organisms ultimately infuses his discussion with an air of unreality One is reminded, reading Spengler, of T. S. Eliot's definition of a heretic: "a person who

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seizes upon a truth and pushes it to the point at which it becomes a falsehood."

That said, for anyone concerned about the survival of culture, there are some important lessons in the armory of cultural instructions accompanying a humble tomato plant. Perhaps the chief lesson has to do with time and continuity, the evolving permanence that *cultura animi* no less than agricultural cultivation requires if it is to be successful. All those tips, habits, prohibitions, and necessities that have been accumulated from time out of mind and passed down, generation after generation: How much in our society militates against such antidotes to anarchy and decay!

Culture survives and develops under the aegis of permanence. Instantaneity—the enemy of permanence—is one of the chief imperatives of our time. It renders anything lasting, anything inherited, suspicious by definition. As Kenneth Minogue observed, "The idea is that one not only lives for the present, but also *ought* to live thus." We want what is faster, newer, less encumbered by the past. If we also cultivate a nostalgia for a simpler, slower time, that just shows the extent to which we are separated from what, in our efforts to decorate our lives, we long for. Nostalgia (Greek for "homesickness") is a version of sentimentality—a predilection, that is to say, to distort rather than acknowledge reality.

The political philosopher Hannah Arendt dilated on one essential aspect of the problem when she argued against taking an instrumental, "self-help" approach to culture. "What is at stake here," Arendt observed in "The Crisis in Culture,"

> is the objective status of the cultural world, which, insofar as it contains tangible things—books and paintings, statues, buildings, and music—comprehends, and gives testimony to, the entire recorded past of countries, nations, and ultimately mankind. As such, the only nonsocial and authentic criterion for judging these specifically cultural things is their relative permanence and even eventual immortality. Only what will last through the centuries can ultimately claim to be a cultural object. The point of the matter is that, as soon as the immortal works of the past became the object of social and individual refinement and the status accorded to it, they lost their most important and elemental quality, which is to grasp and move the reader or the spectator over the centuries.

The "objective status" of the cultural world to which Arendt appeals is precisely the aspect of culture we find hardest to accommodate. If there is a "nonsocial and authentic criterion" for judging cultural achievements, then what happens to the ideology of equivalence that has become such a powerful force in Western societies? Are we not committed to the proposition that *all* values are social? Isn't this part of what social constructionists like Richard Rorty mean when they say language goes "all the way down"? That there is no self, no value, no achievement, no criteria independent of the twitterings of fashion, which in turn are ultimately the twitterings of social power?

The attack on permanence comes in many guises. When trendy literary critics declare that "there is no such thing as intrinsic meaning," they are denying permanent values that transcend the prerogatives of their lucubrations. When a deconstructionist tells us that truth is relative to language, or to power, or to certain social arrangements, he seeks to trump the unanswerable claims of permanent realities with the vacillations of his ingenuity. When the multiculturalist celebrates the fundamental equality of all cultures—excepting, of course, the culture of the West, which he reflexively disparages—he substitutes ephemeral political passions for the recognition of objective cultural achievement. "A pair of boots," a nineteenth-century Russian slogan tells us, "is worth more than Shakespeare." We have here a process of leveling that turns out to be a revolution in values. The implication, as the French philosopher Alain Finkielkraut observed, is that

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> the footballer and the choreographer, the painter and the couturier, the writer and the ad-man, the musician and the rock-and-roller, are all the same: creators. We must scrap the prejudice which restricts that title to certain people and regards others as sub-cultural.

But what seems at first to be an effort to establish cultural parity turns out to be a campaign for cultural reversal. When Sir Elton John is put on the same level as Bach, the effect is not cultural equality but cultural insurrection. (If it seems farfetched to compare Elton John and Bach, recall the literary critic Richard Poirier's remark, in *Partisan Review* in 1967, that "sometimes [the Beatles] are like Monteverdi and sometimes their songs are even better than Schumann's.") It might also be worth asking what had to happen in English society for there to be such a thing as "Sir Elton John." What does *that* tell us about the survival of culture? But some subjects are too painful. Let us draw a veil . . .

"The history of philosophy," Jean-François Revel observed in *The Flight from Truth* (1991), "can be divided into two different periods. During the first, philosophers sought the truth; during the second, they fought against it." That fight has escaped from the parlors of professional sceptics and has increasingly become the moral coin of the realm. As Anthony Daniels observed, it is now routine for academics and intellectuals to use "all the instruments of an exaggerated scepticism . . . not to find truth but to destroy traditions, customs, institutions, and confidence in the worth of civilization itself." The most basic suppositions and distinctions suddenly crumble, like the acidic pages of a poorly made book, eaten away from within. "*A rebours*" becomes the rallying cry of the anti-cultural cultural elite. Culture degenerates from being a *cultura animi* to a *corruptio animi*.

Aldous Huxley's *Brave New World* may be a second-rate novel, but it has turned out to have been first-rate prognostication. Published in 1932, it touches everywhere on twenty-first-century anxieties. Perhaps the aspect of Huxley's dystopian—what to call it: fable? prophecy? admonition?—that is most frequently adduced is its vision of a society that has perfected what we have come to call genetic engineering. It is a world in which reproduction has been entirely handed over to the experts. The word "parents" no longer describes a loving moral commitment but only an attenuated biological datum. Babies are not born but designed according to exacting specifications and "decanted" at sanitary depots like The Central London Hatchery and Conditioning Centre with which the book opens.

As with all efforts to picture future technology, Huxley's description of the equipment and procedures employed at the hatchery seems almost charmingly antiquated, like a space ship imagined by Jules Verne. But Huxley's portrait of the human toll of human ingenuity is very up-to-date.

> *Is there a point at which scientific development can no longer be described, humanly, as progress? We know the benisons of technology; are we about to become more closely acquainted with its depredations?*

Indeed, we have not—not quite, not yet—caught up with the situation he describes. We do not—not quite, not yet—inhabit a world where "mother" and "monogamy" are blasphemous terms from which people have been conditioned to recoil in visceral revulsion. Maybe it will never come to that. (Though monogamy, of course, has long been high on the social and sexual revolutionary's list of hated institutions.) Still, it is a nice question whether developments in reproductive technology will not soon make other aspects of Huxley's fantasy a reality. Thinkers as different as Michel Foucault and Francis Fukuyama have pondered the ad-

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vent of a "posthuman" future. Scientists busily manipulating DNA may prove them right. It is often suggested that what is most disturbing about *Brave New World* is its portrait of eugenics in action: its vision of humanity deliberately divided into genetically ordered castes, a few super-smart alpha-pluses down through a multitude of drone-like Epsilons who do the heavy lifting. Such deliberately instituted inequality offends our democratic sensibilities.

What is sometimes overlooked or downplayed is the possibility that the most disturbing aspect of the future Huxley pictured has less to do with eugenics than genetics. That is to say, perhaps what is centrally repellent about Huxley's hatcheries is not that they codify inequality—nature already does that effectively—but that they exist at all. Are they not a textbook example of Promethean hubris in action?

In the seventeenth-century, Descartes predicted that his scientific method would make man "the master and possessor of nature": are we not fast closing in on the technology that proves him right? And this raises another question. Is there a point at which scientific development can no longer be described, humanly, as progress? We know the benisons of technology; are we about to become more closely acquainted with its depredations? For example, if, as in *Brave New World*, we manage to bypass the "inconvenience" of human pregnancy altogether, should we do it? If—or rather when—that is possible, will it also be desirable? Well, why not? Why should a woman go through the discomfort and danger of pregnancy if a fetus could be safely incubated, or cloned, elsewhere? Wouldn't motherhood by proxy be a good thing—the ultimate labor-saving device? Most readers will hesitate about saying yes. What does that tell us? Some readers will have no hesitation about saying yes; what does *that* tell us?

As Huxley saw, a world in which reproduction was "rationalized" and emancipated from love was also a world in which culture in the Arnoldian sense was not only otiose but dangerous. (This is also a subtheme of that other great dystopian novel, *1984*.) Culture has roots. It limns the future through its implications with the past. Moving the reader or spectator over the centuries, in Arendt's phrase, the monuments of culture transcend the local imperatives of the present. They escape the obsolescence that fashion demands, the predictability that planning requires. They speak of love and hatred, honor and shame, beauty and courage and cowardice—permanent realities of the human situation in so far as it remains human.

The denizens of Huxley's brave new world are designed and educated—perhaps his word, "conditioned," is more accurate—to be rootless, without culture. When a relic of the old order of civilization—a savage who had been born, not decanted—is brought from a reservation into the brave new world, he is surprised to discover that the literary past is forbidden to most of the population.

> "But why is it prohibited?" asked the Savage. In the excitement of meeting a man who had read Shakespeare he had momentarily forgotten everything else.
>
> The Controller shrugged his shoulders. "Because it's old; that's the chief reason. We haven't any use for old things here."
>
> "Even when they're beautiful?"
>
> "Particularly when they're beautiful. Beauty's attractive, and we don't want people to be attracted by old things. We want them to like the new ones."

Huxley's brave new world is above all a superficial world. People are encouraged to like what is new, to live in the moment, because that makes them less complicated and more pliable. Emotional commitments are even more strictly rationed than Shakespeare. In their place, sensations—thrilling, mind-numbing sensations—are available on demand through drugs and motion pictures that neurologically stimulate viewers to experience certain emotions and feelings. The

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fact that they are artificially produced is not a drawback but their very point. The brave new world is a virtual world: experience is increasingly vivid and decreasingly real. The question of meaning is deliberately short-circuited. "You've got to choose," the Resident World Controller for Western Europe patiently explains to the Savage,

> "between happiness and what people used to call high art. We've sacrificed the high art. We have the feelies and the scent organ instead."
>
> "But they don't mean anything."
>
> "They mean themselves; they mean a lot of agreeable sensations to the audience."

If this seems like a prescription for arrested development, that, too, is part of the point: "It is their duty to be infantile," the Controller explains, "even against their inclination." Promiscuity is encouraged because it is a prophylactic against emotional depth. The question of meaning is never pursued beyond the instrumental question of what produces the most pleasure. Socrates told us that the unexamined life is not worth living. Huxley pictures a world in which the unexamined life is the only one available.

Huxley's imagination failed him in one area. He understood that in a world in which reproduction was emancipated from the body, sexual congress would degenerate into a purely recreational activity, an amusement not inherently different from one's *soma* ration or the tactile movies. He pictured a world of casual, indeed mandatory, promiscuity. But he thought it would develop along completely conventional lines. He ought to have known that the quest for "agreeable sensations" would issue in a pansexual carnival. In this area, anyway, we seem to have proceeded a good deal further than the characters who inhabit Huxley's dystopia.

In part, the attack on permanence is an attack on the idea that anything possesses inherent value. Absolute fungibility—the substitution of anything for anything—is the ideal. In one sense, this is a product of what the philosopher Michael Oakeshott criticized as "rationalism." "To the Rationalist," Oakeshott wrote in the late 1940s, "nothing is of value merely because it exists (and certainly not because it has existed for many generations), familiarity has no worth and nothing is to be left standing for want of scrutiny." The realm of sexuality is one area where the effects of such rationalism are dramatically evident. It was not so long ago that the description from Genesis—"male and female created he them"—was taken as a basic existential fact. True, the obstinacy of sexual difference has always been a thorn in the side of utopian rationalism. But it is only in recent decades that the engines of judicial meddlesomeness, on the one hand, and surgical know-how, on the other, have effectively assaulted that once permanent-seeming reality.

Our recent habit of using the term "gender" when we mean "sex" may seem an innocent, nearly a euphemistic, innovation.

> *We have here that curious compact of moral levity and grim self-absorption that has characterized so many partisans of "advanced" opinion from Oscar Wilde on down to our own time. Redacted by the political passions of the 1960s, that strange compact resulted in the vertiginous relativisms that have overpopulated the academy, the art world, and other bastions of elite culture throughout Western society.*

But it is not innocent. It issues not from any residual sense of modesty about sexual matters but from a hubristic effort to reduce sex to gender. The term "gender" has its home in grammar: it names a certain linguistic

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convention. Sex describes a basic biological division. As the columnist George Will noted recently, the substitution of "gender" for "sex" is so widespread because it suggests that sexual differences are themselves a matter of convention—"socially constructed" and therefore susceptible to social deconstruction: susceptible to being "erased by sufficiently determined social engineers." A powerful legal tool in the campaign to substitute gender for sex is Title IX, which is now celebrating its thirtieth anniversary. Written to prohibit discrimination on the basis of sex, it has, in the hands of what Will calls "Title IX fanatics," become a legal bludgeon that is wielded to deny the reality of sexual differences. It has already been used to gut the athletic programs of hundreds of schools and colleges across the country; the next target, Will suggests, will be the curriculum: if a college has an engineering department, it must also have proportional representation of the sexes—sorry, the genders—in that department. Anything less would be an insult to the ideal of equality.

A more florid example of sexual fungibility at work is the explosion of interest in—indeed, the incipient normalization of—"gender reassignment surgery" and other adventures in sexual plasticity. A glance at the personal ads of any "alternative" newspaper—to say nothing of internet sex sites—will reveal a burgeoning sexual demi-monde where the "transsexual," "pansexual," and "virtually sexual" heartily compete with more traditional promiscuities.

Nor are such phenomena confined to such "help wanted" venues. Headline from a California newspaper last summer: "San Francisco is about to embark on another first in the nation: providing health care benefits for city workers undergoing sex-change procedures." "Oh, well," you say: "It's California, what do you expect?" Here's another headline: "Britain's free health care service should provide sex-change operations for transsexuals because they suffer from a legitimate illness, a court has ruled."

Real-life transsexuals are what we might call the objective correlative of an increasingly prominent strand in our culture's fantasy life. Consider, to take just one example, the British artists Dinos and Jake Chapman. Their signature works are pubescent female mannequins studded with erect penises, vaginas, and anuses, fused together in various postures of sexual congress. The thing to notice is not how outrageous but how common such items are. The Chapman brothers are not a back-alley, plain-brown-wrapper phenomenon. Their works are exhibited in major, once staid, galleries like the Royal Academy in London and the Brooklyn Museum in New York. They are "transgressive," all right. But the point is that the transgressions they announce have been to a large extent domesticated and welcomed into the mainstream. It would be bootless to multiply examples—readers will doubtless have lists of their own. Hardly anyone is shocked anymore, but that is a testament not to public enlightenment but to widespread moral anaesthesia. (The question of aesthetics, of distinctively artistic achievement, does not even enter the calculation: what does that tell us?)

What we are seeing in sexual life is the fulfillment, in some segments of society, of the radical emancipatory vision enunciated in the 1960s by such gurus as Herbert Marcuse and Norman O. Brown. In *Eros and Civilization*, for example, Marcuse looked forward to the establishment of a "non-repressive reality principle" in which "the body in its entirety would become . . . an instrument of pleasure." The sexual liberation Marcuse hailed was not a fecund liberation. As in *Brave New World*, children do not enter into the equation. The issue is pleasure, not progeny. Marcuse speaks glowingly of "a resurgence of pregenital polymorphous sexuality" that "protests against the repressive order of procreative sexuality." A look at the alarmingly low birth rates of most affluent nations today suggests that the protest has been effective. When Tocqueville warned about the peculiar form of des-

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potism that threatened democracy, he noted that instead of tyrannizing men, as past despotisms had done, it tended to infantilize them, keeping "them fixed irrevocably in childhood." What Tocqueville warned about, Marcuse celebrated, extolling the benefits of returning to a state of "primary narcissism" in which one will find "the redemption of pleasure, the halt of time, the absorption of death; silence, sleep, night, paradise—the Nirvana principle not as death but as life." What Marcuse encouraged, in other words, is solipsism, not as a philosophical principle but as a moral indulgence, a way of life.

It is often said that we are entering the "information age." There is doubtless some truth in that. But what does it mean? The shocking bulletins appear with clocklike regularity: students seem to know less and less history, less and less mathematics, less and less literature, less and less geography.

Wherever we look—at our schools and colleges, at our churches, museums, courts, and legislatures—we see well underway a process of abdication: a process whereby institutions created to protect certain values have been "deconstructed" and turned against the very things they were meant to preserve.

In May, Diane Ravitch bemoaned the "truly abysmal scores" highschool seniors made in an American history examination: only one in ten did well enough to be considered proficient in the subject. The week before, some other report had bad news about other students and some other subject. Next week's depressing finding is already in press.

Welcome to the information age. Data, data everywhere, but no one knows a thing. In the West, at least, practically everybody has instant access to huge databases and news-retrieval services, to say nothing of television and other media. With a few clicks of the mouse we can bring up every line of Shakespeare that contains the word "darkling" or the complete text of Aeschylus in Greek or in translation. Information about contract law in ancient Rome or yesterday's developments in microchip technology in Japan is at our fingertips. If we are traveling to Paris, we can book our airline ticket and hotel reservation online, check the local weather, and find out the best place to have dinner near the Place des Vosges. We can correspond and exchange documents with friends on the other side of the globe in the twinkling of an eye. Our command of information is staggering.

And yet with that command comes a great temptation. Partly, it is the temptation to confuse an excellent means of communication with communications that are excellent. We confuse, that is to say, process with product. What Eric Ormsby observed about contemporary librarians goes for the rest of us: our fascination with means has led us "to ignore and neglect the ends."

There is also a tendency to confuse propinquity with possession. The fact that some text is available online or on CD-ROM does not mean that one has read and absorbed its contents. When I was in graduate school, there were always students who tended to suppose that by making a Xerox copy of some document they had also read, or half-read, or at least looked into it. Today that same tendency is exacerbated by high-speed internet access. We can download a veritable library of material to our computer in a few minutes; that does not mean we have mastered its riches. Information is not synonymous with knowledge, let alone wisdom.

At the end of the *Phaedrus*, Plato has Socrates tell the story of the god Theuth, who, legend has it, invented the art of writing. When Theuth presented his new invention to the king of Egypt, he promised

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the king that it would make his people "wiser and improve their memories." But the king disagreed, claiming that the habit of writing, far from improving memories, would "implant forgetfulness" by encouraging people to rely on external marks rather than "the living speech graven in the soul."

Well, none of us would wish to do without writing—or computers, come to that. Nor, I think, would Plato have wanted us to. (Though he would probably have been severe about television. That bane of intelligence could have been created specifically to illustrate Plato's idea that most people inhabit a kind of existential "cave" in which they mistake flickering images for realities.) Plato's indirect comments—through the mouth of Socrates recounting an old story he picked up somewhere—have less to do with writing (an art, after all, in which Plato excelled) than with the priority of immediate experience: the "living speech graven in the soul." Plato may have been an idealist. But here as elsewhere he appears as an apostle of vital, first-hand experience: a realist in the deepest sense of the term.

The problem with computers is not the worlds they give us instant access to but the world they encourage us to neglect. Everyone knows about the studies showing the bad effects on children and teenagers of too much time in cyberspace. It cuts them off from their family and friends, fosters asocial behavior, disrupts their ability to concentrate, and makes it harder for them to distinguish between fantasy and reality. I suspect, however, that the real problem is not so much the sorry cases that make headlines but a more generally disseminated attitude toward the world.

When I entered the phrase "virtual reality," the Google search engine (at last count, 2,073,418,204 pages indexed) returned 1,260,000 hits in .12 seconds. There are many, many organizations like the Virtual Reality Society, "an international society dedicated to the discussion and advancement of virtual reality and synthetic environments." Computer simulations, video games, special effects: in some areas of life, virtual reality seems to be crowding out the other variety. It gives a whole new significance to Villiers de L'Isle-Adam's world-weary mot: *Vivre? Les serviteurs feront cela pour nous.*

The issue is not, or not only, the digital revolution—the sudden explosion of computers and email and the internet. It is rather the effect of such developments on our moral and imaginative life, and even our cognitive life. Why bother to get Shakespeare by heart when you can look it up in a nonce on the internet? One reason, of course, is that a passage memorized is a passage internalized: it becomes part of the mental sustenance of the soul. It's the difference between a living limb and a crutch.

It used to be said that in dreams begin responsibilities. What responsibilities does a virtual world inspire? Virtual responsibilities, perhaps: responsibilities undertaken on spec, as it were. A virtual world is a world that can be created, manipulated, and dissolved at will. It is a world whose reverberations are subject to endless revision. The Delete key is always available. Whatever is done can be undone. Whatever is undone can be redone.

Of course, as the meditations of Huxley and Marcuse suggest, computers and the internet do not create the temptations of virtual reality; they merely exacerbate them. They magnify a perennial human possibility. Human beings do not need cyberspace to book a vacation from reality. The problem is not computers or indeed any particular technology but rather our disposition toward the common world that culture defines. When we ask about the survival of culture and the fortunes of permanence, we are asking about the fate of that common world. In many respects it is a political question—or, more precisely, a question regarding the limits of politics. When Susan Sontag, in the mid-1960s, championed the "new sensibility" she saw erupting across American society, she rightly observed that its representatives "have broken, whether

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they know it or not, with the Matthew Arnold notion of culture, finding it historically and humanly obsolescent."

What exactly is the "Matthew Arnold notion of culture" that Sontag and her cadre of hip intellectuals rejected as outmoded and irrelevant? For one thing, as we have seen, it is culture understood as a repository of mankind's noblest spiritual and intellectual aspirations: "the best," as Arnold put it, "that has been thought and said in the world." The "Matthew Arnold notion of culture" is thus a hierarchical idea of culture—a vision of culture as a "sacred order" whose majesty depends on its relevance to our deepest cares and concerns.

A second feature of the "Matthew Arnold notion of culture" is its independence—what Arnold summed up in the term "disinterestedness." Criticism achieves disinterestedness, Arnold said,

> by keeping aloof from what is called "the practical view of things"; by resolutely following the law of its own nature, which is to be a free play of the mind on all subjects which it touches. By steadily refusing to lend itself to any of those ulterior, political, practical considerations about ideas . . .

In the end, Arnold's ideal of disinterestedness was rescued from the frivolity of aestheticism by its commitment to truth. "Its business," he said, is to know and propagate the best, to "create a current of true and fresh ideas," and "to do this with inflexible honesty." It tells us a great deal about the state of culture that the ideal of disinterestedness is not merely neglected but actively repudiated by many influential academics and intellectuals today.

A third feature of the "Matthew Arnold notion of culture" is its immediacy, its emphasis not on virtual but on first-hand experience. "Here," Arnold noted, "the great safeguard is never to let oneself become abstract, always to retain an intimate and lively consciousness of the truth of what one is saying, and, the moment this fails us, to be sure that something is wrong." The "Matthew Arnold notion of culture," then, comes armed with a sixth sense against the seductions of the spurious, the attractions of the ersatz.

Ultimately, what Sontag had against Arnold's view of culture was its earnestness, its seriousness. When she celebrated the Camp sensibility, she did so largely because in Camp she found a nimble ally in her effort "to dethrone the serious." Her praise of pop culture, pornography, and the pullulating ephemera of the counterculture must be understood as part of her battle against seriousness as traditionally defined. We have here that curious compact of moral levity and grim self-absorption that has characterized so many partisans of "advanced" opinion from Oscar Wilde on down to our own time. Redacted by the political passions of the 1960s, that strange compact resulted in the vertiginous relativisms that have overpopulated the academy, the art world, and other bastions of elite culture throughout Western society.

Part of the task that faces us now is to acknowledge the depth of barbarism that challenges the survival of culture. And part of that acknowledgment lies in reaffirming the core values that are under attack. Ultimately, victory in the conflict that besieges us will be determined not by smart weapons but by smart heads.

Part of what makes those relativisms vertiginous is their inconsistency. What we see in contemporary culture is relativism with a vengeance. It is a *directed*, activist relativism, forgiving and nonjudgmental about anything hostile to the perpetuation of traditional Western culture, full of self-righteous retribution when it comes to individuals

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and institutions friendly to the West. It incubates what Mark Steyn described as "the slyer virus": "the vague sense that the West's success must somehow be responsible for the rest's failure." It is in effect a sort of secularized Jansenism: we are always in the wrong, not in the eyes of God but in the eyes of the exotic Other as imagined by us.

It has long been obvious that "multiculturalism" is another word for "anti-Americanism." It is anti-Americanism on a peculiar moralistic jag. Its effect has been to pervert institutions hitherto entrusted with the preservation and transmission of our spiritual, political, and intellectual heritage. The institutions persist, but their purpose is stymied. Wherever we look—at our schools and colleges, at our churches, museums, courts, and legislatures—we see well underway a process of abdication: a process whereby institutions created to protect certain values have been "deconstructed" and turned against the very things they were meant to preserve.

Consider what has happened to the judiciary. In any society that enjoys the rule of law, courts are a custodian of permanence. The task of judges is to uphold the laws that have been passed down to them, not make new ones. But as Robert Bork has shown—and as we see all around us—the American judiciary has to an extraordinary extent become the "enemy of traditional culture." On issues from free speech and religion to sexuality, feminism, education, and race, the courts have acted less as a defender of the law than as an avant-garde establishing new beachheads to promulgate the gospel of left-liberal enlightenment. The effect has been to inure society to rule by diktat, a situation in this country that is as novel as it is ominous. "It would," Judge Bork observes, "have been unthinkable until recently that so many areas of our national life would be controlled by judges." One again recalls Tocqueville's warning about democratic despotism. Only now it is not the sovereign but the judiciary that

> extends its arms over society as a whole; it covers its surface with a network of small, complicated, painstaking, uniform rules through which the most original minds and the most vigorous souls cannot clear a way to surpass the crowd; it does not break wills, but it softens them, bends them, and directs them; it rarely forces one to act, but it constantly opposes itself to one's acting; it does not destroy, it prevents things from being born; it does not tyrannize, it hinders, compromises, enervates, extinguishes, dazes, and finally reduces each nation to being nothing more than a herd of timid and industrious animals of which the government is the shepherd.

The attack on permanence is a failure of principle that results in moral paralysis. Chesterton once defined madness as "using mental activity so as to reach mental helplessness." That is an apt description of a process we see at work in many segments of our social and intellectual life. It is not so much a version of Hamlet's disease—being sicklied o'er with the pale cast of thought—as an example of what happens when conscience is no longer animated by principle and belief.

Item: Friday, May 17: "Hamas Founder Says Suicide Attacks Will Continue." Really? And what about us: what do we have to say about that abomination? Mostly, we wring our hands and mumble about restarting the "peace process." In a recent column, Linda Chavez reported on an episode of National Public Radio's "All Things Considered" in which a group of second- and third-generation Palestinian Americans living in Northern Virginia were interviewed. If you had been thinking of taking a holiday there, you may wish to reconsider, or at least be sure that your life insurance premiums are paid up. As Ms. Chavez noted, the sentiments expressed could have come from Hamas. "It doesn't matter who dies," said one young boy who idolizes the suicide bombers, "just as long as they're Israeli." His mother blames Israel: "They've made him violent and hate them." His father swells with paternal pride: "If his time has come, he

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will die, regardless of where he is. But at least he will die for a cause. I will live the rest of my life being proud of him." What about the rule of law? Forget it. American democratic values? Don't make me laugh. What we have here, Ms. Chavez observes, is "a reflection of our new multicultural America, where young people are taught that one's allegiance to one's ethnic group takes precedence over allegiance to the United States or adherence to democratic values."

When immigrants become American citizens, they take an oath of allegiance. Among other things, they must "absolutely and entirely renounce and abjure all allegiance and fidelity to any foreign prince, potentate, state, or sovereignty of whom or which [they] have heretofore been a subject or citizen." But such promises are only so many words to a population cut adrift from the permanent values enshrined in America's political principles. The fault lies with the elites who no longer respect and stand up for those principles. "No taxation without representation" is a splendid demand. But so is "no immigration without assimilation." Where is the simple imperative that one live up to one's oaths or face the consequences? If one becomes an American citizen, then one must become an American citizen, with the rights *and duties* pertaining thereto. If that proves too onerous, perhaps citizenship should be revoked and a one-way ticket to elsewhere provided. Such drastic measures would not be a sign of excessive rigor but an example of beneficence in action. It is kindness to stymie the forces of anarchy. By supporting the permanent values that undergird society, such enforcement would be a vote for civilization against chaos.

Since September 11, questions about the survival of culture have naturally taken on a new urgency. The focus suddenly shifted away from the airier purlieus of cultural endeavor to survival in the most visceral sense. The murderous fanatics who destroyed the World Trade Center, smashed into the Pentagon, and killed thousands of innocent civilians took the issue of multiculturalism out of the fetid atmosphere of the graduate seminar and into the streets. Or, rather, they dramatized the fact that multiculturalism was never a merely academic matter. In a sense, the actions of those terrorists were less an attack on the United States than part of what Binyamin Netanyahu called "a war to reverse the triumph of the West." We are very far from being in a position to assess the full significance of September 11 for the simple reason that the detonations that began that day continue to reverberate and destroy. A battle of wills, a contest of values, was initiated or at least openly acknowledged on September 11. It is much too early to predict the course of that conflict.

September 11 precipitated a crisis the end of which we cannot see. Part of the task that faces us now is to acknowledge the depth of barbarism that challenges the survival of culture. And part of that acknowledgment lies in reaffirming the core values that are under attack. Ultimately, victory in the conflict that besieges us will be determined not by smart weapons but by smart heads. That is to say, the conflict is not so much—not only—a military conflict as a conflict of world views. It is convenient to command the carrier battle groups and cruise missiles; it is essential to possess the will to use them and the faith that our cause, the cause of culture, is the best hope for mankind. Mark Steyn put it well: "If we are as ashamed as we insist we are—of ourselves, our culture and our history—then inevitably we will invite our own destruction." The horrifying slaughter of September 11 tempts us to draw a line around that day and treat it and its immediate consequences as an exceptional case. There is a deep sense, however, in which the terrorist attacks underscore not the fragility of normality but the normality of fragility. This is a point that C. S. Lewis made with great eloquence in a sermon he preached at Oxford in 1939. "I think it important," he said,

> to try to see the present calamity in a true

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perspective. The war creates no absolutely new situation: it simply aggravates the permanent human situation so that we can no longer ignore it. Human life has always been lived on the edge of a precipice. Human culture has always had to exist under the shadow of something infinitely more important than itself. If men had postponed the search for knowledge and beauty until they were secure, the search would never have begun.

We are mistaken when we compare war with "normal life." Life has never been normal. Even those periods which we think most tranquil, like the nineteenth century, turn out, on closer inspection, to be full of crises, alarms, difficulties, emergencies. Plausible reasons have never been lacking for putting off all merely cultural activities until some imminent danger has been averted or some crying injustice put right. But humanity long ago chose to neglect those plausible reasons. They wanted knowledge and beauty now, and would not wait for the suitable moment that never comes. Periclean Athens leaves us not only the Parthenon but, significantly, the Funeral Oration. The insects have chosen a different line: they have sought first the material welfare and security of the hive, and presumably they have their reward.

Men are different. They propound mathematical theorems in beleaguered cities, conduct metaphysical arguments in condemned cells, make jokes on scaffolds, discuss the latest new poem while advancing to the walls of Quebec, and comb their hair at Thermopylae. This is not panache: it is our nature.

Lewis's meditation is by turns cheering and sobering. On the one hand, it testifies to the heartiness of culture, which is the heartiness of the human spirit. Sonnets in Siberia, mathematical formulae in the besieged fortress. There is no time when cultural instructions are not pertinent. On the other hand, Lewis's meditation reminds us that culture, and the humanity that defines it, is constantly under threat. No achievement may be taken for granted; yesterday's gain may be tomorrow's loss; permanent values require permanent vigilance and permanent renewal.

What lessons may we draw from these Janus-faced conclusions? One is that it is always later than you think. Another is that it is never too late to start anew. Our French friends have lately taken to disparging the "*simplisme*" of America's foreign policy. In fact, most important truths are—I use the adverb advisedly—terribly simple. Our complexity is much more likely to lead us astray than any simplicity we may follow. In *Notes Towards a Definition of Culture*, T. S. Eliot observed that "If any definite conclusions emerge from this study, one of them surely is this, that culture is the one thing that we cannot deliberately aim at. It is the product of a variety of more or less harmonious activities, each pursued for its own sake."

"For its own sake." That is one simple idea that is everywhere imperiled today. When we plant a garden, it is bootless to strive directly for camellias. They are the natural product of our care, nurture, and time. We can manage that when it comes to agriculture. When we turn our hands to *cultura animi*, we seem to be considerably less successful. The historian John Lukacs has just published a gloomy book called *At the End of an Age*. He argues that "we in the West are living near the end of an entire age," that the Modern Age, which began with the Renaissance, is jerking, crumbling irretrievably to its end. I believe Lukacs is precipitate. After all, prophecies of the end have been with us since the beginning. Where Lukacs is on to something, however, is in his meditations on the ideology of progress. Science does not deserve the scare quotes with which Lukacs adorns it, but it is true that much that we have taken for progress looks with the passage of time more and more dubious. The survival of culture is never a sure thing. Our acknowledgment of that fact is one important sign of our strength.

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Radical history

by Harvey Klehr & John Earl Haynes

In Israel's war of independence in 1948, American Communists were deeply involved in the covert shipment of arms to the new state of Israel, and Communists were prominent among those Americans wounded or killed in battles protecting Israel from Arab attack. How do we know this? It says so in a standard reference book found in hundreds of American libraries. The *Encyclopedia of the American Left*, published by Oxford University Press, was selected by *Choice* and *Library Journal* as one of the ten best reference books published in 1990. It sold so well that a second edition appeared in 1998. Reference books are expected to summarize the scholarly consensus and to present reliable information. In fact these claims about the role of American Communists in Israel's founding, made in the second edition, have no basis whatsoever in any historical literature. Yet this and other distortions in this reference work have gone unchallenged by the historical profession.

This last year has not been good for the reputation of American historians. The first exhibit: Joseph Ellis, a professor at Mount Holyoke College, winner of a National Book Award for his biography of Thomas Jefferson and the Pulitzer Prize for *Founding Brothers*. The *Boston Globe* discovered that, contrary to what he told his classes and claimed in interviews, Ellis had never fought in Vietnam, worked in the civil rights movement in Mississippi, or even been a high-school football hero. Embarrassed by revelations that Ellis had lied to his students, Mount Holyoke after some hesitation suspended him for a year without pay and lifted his endowed chair.

Ellis's classroom transgressions were bad enough, but at least no evidence has come forward regarding irregularities in his books and scholarly works. But not long after Ellis had been identified as a fantasist, the best-selling author and historian Stephen Ambrose was exposed as a plagiarist. Fred Barnes of *The Weekly Standard* noted the disturbing similarity between passages in *The Wild Blue*, his popular account of B-29 combat missions over Europe, and a previously published book, Thomas Childers's *Wings of Morning*. Sleuths quickly unearthed four additional Ambrose books with substantial borrowing from other writers dating back to 1975. Coming just weeks after the considerable success of the World War II miniseries "Band of Brothers," based on his book, the charges received considerable attention. Ambrose, a former professor at the University of New Orleans, admitted the unauthorized borrowing, explained that his books are researched and written by a team of employees, expressed mild remorse, and suggested that the plagiarism issue was something that academics took too seriously. His publisher did not seem overly concerned that its best-selling author repeatedly used other writers' words.

While journalists were scouring Ambrose's books, another high-profile scholar,

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Doris Kearns Goodwin, came under fire for the same offense. Formerly a professor of government at Harvard, the best-selling author of *The Fitzgeralds and The Kennedys* and a Pulitzer Prize winner for *No Ordinary Time* about Franklin and Eleanor Roosevelt still serves on the Board of Overseers of Harvard University, an institution that takes student plagiarism very seriously. Goodwin confessed to extensive, unattributed, and improper use of material and to making a private financial settlement to Lynne McTaggart, author of a biography of Kathleen Kennedy. Goodwin's embarrassment was compounded not only because she was forced to admit to additional acts of plagiarism in other books but also because she had previously publicly chastised Joe McGinness for improperly borrowing from *her* own work. She attributed the plagiarism to her sloppy note-taking methods. Goodwin stepped down from service as a commentator on The NewsHour with Jim Lehrer, but, despite calls from *The Harvard Crimson* for her removal, she remains on the Harvard Board.

The most serious recent charges of academic fraud, however, were leveled at the Emory University historian Michael Bellesiles. In 2000, reviewers hailed his *Arming America: The Origins of a National Gun Culture* as a major work of scholarship destined to change the terms of the debate on firearms in American life. Bellesiles claimed that he had demonstrated that gun ownership was a far less common phenomenon in early American life than had been widely assumed, and his publisher advertised the book as a direct challenge to the National Rifle Association and its values. In addition to a glowing front-page review in *The New York Times*, *Arming America* was praised by academic historians and pundits and received the prestigious Bancroft Prize, awarded by Columbia University for the best book in American history. Within a year, however, disturbing questions about Bellesiles's use of sources and data began to emerge. Critics were unable to find not merely some of the documents he cited, but some of the document *collections* he had claimed to have examined. Skeptics also discovered he had not quoted accurately from records they did unearth, and they were unable to verify a number of his claims. Quantitative historians demonstrated that figures he had calculated about the percentages of colonists who owned guns were mathematically implausible and based on flawed sampling techniques. By the end of 2001, Emory University had undertaken an investigation to determine if he had committed fraud, and, if so, how he should be penalized.

The charges against Bellesiles are of a different magnitude than the sins of Ellis, Ambrose, and Goodwin. Whatever their culpability, none has been accused of inventing documents or deliberately misquoting or mischaracterizing historical evidence in the service of an ideological cause. But such actions, while certainly not common among historians, are, unfortunately, not once-in-a-blue-moon occurrences.

Paul Buhle is a faculty member in American Civilization at Brown University and one of the luminaries in the study of American radicalism. Like many of his colleagues in this area, he has impeccable radical credentials. He attended the University of Illinois, where he became a socialist and an activist in Students for a Democratic Society during the 1960s. At a brief stop-over at graduate school in Connecticut he started *Radical America*, a journal devoted to American history and popular culture, before arriving at the University of Wisconsin in Madison in 1967 for further graduate training. While his S.D.S. colleagues turned to violence and increasingly apocalyptic rhetoric, Buhle nurtured *Radical America*, which was supported by grants from left-wing foundations and devoted to "throwing monographs at an intellectually keen audience" instead of bombs.

Even before he received his Ph.D. in American history in 1975 for a dissertation entitled *Marxism in the U.S. 1900–1940*, Buhle had made a mark as a prominent figure among New Left historians. Since then he has written, co-authored, or edited at least

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eighteen books and innumerable articles. He writes for such journals as *Radical History Review*—a publication that plainly states it "rejects conventional notions of scholarly neutrality and 'objectivity,' and approaches history from an *engaged, critical, political stance*"—and contributes regularly to *Tikkun*. As the history profession has become increasingly politicized in recent decades, Buhle has increasingly written for more mainstream journals, including the prestigious *Journal of American History*, and has contributed to the Organization of American Historians' professional *Newsletter*. He founded and continues to direct the Oral History of the American Left at the Tamiment Library of New York University, an ambitious effort to develop an extensive archive of interviews with hundreds of radical activists. Along with his wife, his fellow Brown historian Mari Jo Buhle, a recipient of a MacArthur Foundation "genius grant," and Dan Georgakas, Buhle co-edited the *Encyclopedia of the American Left*.

There is no reason why radical historians cannot do good history; one can disagree with the conclusions another historian has reached, dispute the significance he places on certain facts, or challenge the interpretive framework he uses, and still recognize that he has illuminated a problem, or uncovered new information, or challenged old preconceptions. Years ago, in *Radical America*, Buhle himself insisted that radical historians had to be scrupulous about their facts. Criticizing the discipline of history, he nonetheless praised many of its practitioners by noting: "The most important positive feature we see is that, through imposition of fairly rigorous standards of evidence, the profession has helped to produce a great mass of historical writings which, although they may often ask trivial questions, nevertheless provide data that is generally reliable."

Where he once gloried in standing on the margins of the historical profession, Buhle now claims to inhabit the middle of a broad stream. In a featured essay in *The Newsletter*, he wrote: "Every scholar has a perfect right to political and personal views: rigidly anti-Communist, Communist or (for the great majority of us) 'other.'" Leave aside the less than perfect balance—anti-Communists are *rigid* while Communists are just, well, Communists. Focus instead on the suggestion that Paul Buhle works in the mainstream of some wide scholarly consensus that lies between the rigidities of anti-Communists and Communists. In fact, the span of acceptable politics in Buhle's worldview is far left of center. He is willing to put Stalin on the left as an extremist, but only if one agrees that Harry Truman is an extremist of the right. Writing in *Radical History Review* in 1994, Buhle judged Truman as "America's Stalin" and went on to declare, "when the judgment of the twentieth century's second half is made, every American president will be seen as a jerk. After Truman, Nixon yields only to Reagan—still another Truman heir—as the jerkiest of all."

Apart from the coarseness of the writing, how accurate is the radical history produced by Paul Buhle? A review of some sections of the *Encyclopedia of the American Left* shows that it is about as accurate as *The Great Soviet Encyclopedia*. Take the issue of the funding of the Communist Party, U.S.A. by the Soviet Union, by now about as established and uncontested a "fact" as one could imagine. (Among other evidence are the receipts signed by the party leader Gus Hall for millions of dollars handed over to him by K.G.B. couriers.) The first edition of *The Encyclopedia of the American Left* gave little attention to the issue of Soviet funding of American Communism. When the second edition appeared in 1998, after abundant documentation of Soviet subsidies had been published, Buhle felt compelled to offer a convoluted and deceptive account of the issue.

He first noted that secret ties between immigrant radicals and their homelands were not unusual. In the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, Germans, Irish, and other ethnic Americans were constantly sending money back to comrades in their homelands and

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"inevitably, legal niceties were avoided." Of course, this was money *from* America to foreign countries, not the other way around. He did allow that the Bolshevik revolution had changed this pattern in some ways. But, while there were Soviet subsidies to American Communists, he insisted that most of the money still flowed the other way—from Americans to the U.S.S.R.; "the overwhelming flow of money went from American shores to the Soviet Union, mainly for specific campaigns, such as food support in the early 1920s and war relief in the 1940s." But this deliberately confuses apples and oranges. The huge amounts of funds, openly raised and openly sent to the U.S.S.R. for famine relief in the early 1920s and war relief in the 1940s, cannot be compared to Moscow's clandestine subsidies to a revolutionary political movement within the United States. Further, the bulk of the famine and war relief was not even from immigrant radicals as Buhle implies but from a broad spectrum of Americans motivated by humanitarian concerns. For example, Herbert Hoover, no friend of Bolshevism, spearheaded the Russian famine relief campaign in the early 1920s.

As for the specific monies transferred to the C.P.U.S.A. by the K.G.B., Buhle is silent. Instead, in another entry written with fellow co-editor Dan Georgakas, he attributes the C.P.U.S.A.'s ability to support a daily newspaper, despite a lack of advertising and a paucity of members, not to Soviet subsidies, but partly to "the strength of library subscriptions in the Soviet Union and its bloc." In contrast to these relatively benign-sounding library subscriptions, Buhle tries to divert attention by pointing to C.I.A. funding of an ex-Communist leader: "Heavily funded by C.I.A. sources, . . . Jay Lovestone, now fervently anti-Soviet, used his personal network of associates to shape labor's own counterintelligence agency. Millions of dollars were passed to friendly labor officials in Europe, particularly in France and Italy. Later, connections between the C.I.A. and heroin gangsters reputedly began in a complex alliance against French Communists."

East bloc libraries and institutions did purchase thousands of subscriptions to C.P.U.S.A. publications. But these were a lesser indirect subsidy of American Communist activities and were not in the same league with Soviet delivery to the C.P.U.S.A. of millions of dollars in cash subsidies, subsidies that go unexamined in *The Encyclopedia of the American Left*. Moreover, whatever the merits or morality of the C.I.A. funding of Jay Lovestone's anti-Communist activities, there is far less documentary evidence to support the charge that the C.I.A. was linked to "heroin gangsters" than to evidence demonstrating Soviet subsidies to the C.P.U.S.A. to support espionage.

Diverting attention to the C.I.A. is Buhle's favorite tactic when confronted by stories of Soviet money. He is not careful whether the stories are true or not. In one essay published in the *Newsletter*, he linked the C.I.A.-funded American Committee for Cultural Freedom to the "highly prestigious scholarly series 'Communism in American Life.'" According to Buhle, the 'Communism in American Life' series "was secretly planned by the board of the American Committee for Cultural Freedom, with generous funding arranged for a handful of scholars." The 'Communism in American Life' books were critical of the C.P.U.S.A., and linking them to the C.I.A. was Buhle's way of discrediting them. Yet Buhle's cited source, Sigmund Diamond's *Compromised Campus*, made no such charge. Diamond, a vociferous critic of the A.C.C.F., discussed the *attempt* of the A.C.C.F. to play a role in the 'Communism in American Life' project and its recommendations for authors. But Diamond also wrote that the Fund for the Republic, creator of the 'Communism in American Life' project, *rejected* the proposals from the A.C.C.F., and he says nothing about C.I.A. funding of the project. Contrary to Buhle's assertion, there is no evidence that the series was planned by the A.C.C.F. or that the C.I.A. arranged the funding.

It is not only on the issue of funding that

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the *Encyclopedia of the American Left* engages in falsification and obfuscation. The new evidence from Moscow archives has documented not only extensive Soviet financing of the C.P.U.S.A. but also direct Party participation in espionage against the United States. Those like Buhle who have devoted their lives to trumpeting a distinctly American, independent radicalism have been discomfited by these revelations. Rather than confront the issue, they have dissembled.

The first edition of *The Encyclopedia of the American Left* did not have an entry for "Secret Work." Enthusiasts for American Communism long had ridiculed stories of a party underground and Communist involvement in espionage told by ex-Communists such as Whittaker Chambers, Louis Budenz, and Elizabeth Bentley. By the time the second edition appeared in 1998, the documentary material emerging from Russian archives had established that the C.P.U.S.A. had an underground secret apparatus that cooperated with Soviet intelligence. The Venona documents, deciphered cables between K.G.B. spies in the United States and Moscow, began to appear in 1995 and further confirmed the widespread participation of American Communists in espionage. The issue had to be confronted, so for the 1998 edition Buhle wrote an entry on "Secret Work."

Buhle admitted that some top-level Communists were aware of Soviet espionage but found a convenient scapegoat: the same Jay Lovestone, party leader in the late 1920s, who had also served as his foil on the issue of funding. Lovestone was a handy villain because he indeed had connections with Soviet intelligence, but chiefly because after the mid-1930s he became a leading anti-Communist and in the 1950s assisted the C.I.A. "A handful of trade union officials—most prominent among them, Jay Lovestone, former Communist Party leader and future associate of the Central Intelligence Agency (C.I.A.)—and some liberal intellectuals apparently traded secret communications with the Soviet regime in the 1930s, but the substance of them involved personal information without any great importance or high-level security connections." Buhle loathes Lovestone because he became an anti-Communist. By implying that the only Communist leader who spied for the U.S.S.R. also spied for the United States, he tried to suggest that the whole issue was at least morally equivalent. But, of course, when Lovestone aided the C.I.A., he was an American citizen helping an American security agency, hardly the same thing as an American citizen assisting a hostile foreign power such as the Soviet Union.

Nor was Lovestone the most significant C.P.U.S.A. leader to participate in Soviet espionage. Earl Browder and Eugene Dennis, who led the C.P.U.S.A. from 1930 to 1959, a period during which the party was far more important than it had been during Lovestone's brief reign in the 1920s, were closely connected to Soviet intelligence. Buhle never names the "liberal intellectuals" he says also engaged in Soviet espionage, possibly because there were none. Nor does Buhle explain why they or anyone else would use espionage channels to provide, as he writes, "personal information" to the U.S.S.R.

When he turned to the issue of espionage in the 1940s, Buhle's essay in the *Encyclopedia* first justified spying and then trivialized it. Buhle first stated that the Office of Strategic Services, America's chief World War II intelligence agency, gave a new dimension to left-wing secret work by hiring radicals and thus "unleashed an unprecedented flurry of left-wing spy activity, some of which inevitably continued into the Cold War era." But he never explained why it was "unprecedented" or why it "inevitably" continued. Likewise, he noted that the employment of so many left-wingers on the atomic bomb project "virtually ensur[ed] the passage of some highly classified information to a power which at the time was a formal ally." Once again, he eschews any effort to explain who spied, or why any left-winger would inevitably be a source of information for the U.S.S.R. One obvious implication is that the American

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government was responsible for whatever espionage took place because the atomic bomb project and the O.S.S. hired left-wingers. Buhle does not seem to recognize that his assumption that left-wingers would "inevitably" want to assist the U.S.S.R. by turning over secret information provides a very powerful rationale for the Truman administration's Loyalty-Security Program that Buhle himself despises.

Regardless of the inevitability of Communists spying for the Soviet Union, Buhle dismisses the significance of the espionage issue. "Such intrigues had almost no role in the day-to-day activities of the American Left, save for the need of Communists to deny the existence of spying by or for the Russians and for anti-Communist socialists to insist upon its central importance to American Communists at large." But how can what Buhle calls "an unprecedented flurry of left-wing spy activity, some of which inevitably continued into the Cold War era," be irrelevant to historical debates over whether the C.P.U.S.A. was a legitimate participant in domestic politics during the Cold War era? Further playing down the importance of espionage, he reduces the "secret apparatus" to "rumors circulated within and without the Left concerning possible Russian agents" and adds speculation that "American Communist leaders may have informally assured members that the Russians could penetrate the renowned American security state. . . . Garrulous old-timers who had served in the Spanish Civil War and World War II sometimes hinted and even bragged about what they might be able to do in a moment of international crisis."

Immediately after belittling the significance of "such intrigues" involving the Soviet Union, Buhle suggests that there was more significant "secret work" committed on behalf of Israel by American Communists: "Little was said within the Left or outside it concerning the largest incident of illegal activity: the shipment of arms and assorted war materials to the new state of Israel." Apart from its irrelevance to the issue of Soviet espionage, the question of American Communist covert assistance to Israel in 1948 is presented without any supporting evidence. Neither of the two sources Buhle provides at the end of his entry says a word about the issue.

His further claim that "among those Americans wounded or killed in battles protecting Israeli gains from Arabs, Communists played a prominent role" is unsupported by any evidence. Yehuda Bauer, the distinguished Israeli historian, called the claim "sheer nonsense." The former national president of the American Veterans of Israel, Simon Spiegelman, labeled it "absolutely false," noting that most of the forty Americans and Canadians who died in 1948 were actually connected to one of the right-wing Israeli political movements The most thorough account of the Jewish role on the American left does not mention any such volunteers. American Communists would have trumpeted this sacrifice in the late 1940s, but there is no evidence they ever did. *Jewish Currents*, a magazine founded by ex-Communists whose writers and editors have run innumerable articles about Israel and Communism, has never mentioned "the prominent role" played by American Communists fighting and dying in the Israeli War of Independence.

We contacted *Jewish Currents* regarding Buhle's claim of Communists fighting in the Israeli war of independence. The magazine in turn got in touch with several veteran radicals, including the *Daily Worker*'s correspondent in Palestine in 1947–1948, who unanimously dismissed the assertion as laughable or outrageous.

We also contacted Professor Buhle directly and asked for the documentary basis for the claim. Buhle responded that it was based on oral history interviews but he could remember only the name of one of the interviewees and was not sure if that was the correct one. We obtained a copy of the interview from the Tamiment Library at New York University. It contained no support for the *Encyclopedia's* assertion. Addi-

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tional inquiries to Professor Buhle requesting the documentary basis for the published claim in the *Encyclopedia* produced no specific sources.

It was Labor Zionists and the Jewish Joint Distribution Committee that coordinated the vast majority of the fundraising and arms shipments that went to Israel in 1947–1948, not, as Buhle implies, American Communists. The Czech Communist government shipped arms to Israel, and there are rumors of I.R.A. contributions. Some stray American Communists might even have been involved. But how could this constitute the "largest incident of illegal activity" on the part of the Left? Even if one or two oral history interviewees claimed to know a stray American Communist who fought and died in Israel, how could a responsible historian accept it as the truth in the absence of any documentary evidence? And even if there were one or two such obscure people, how did they become transmogrified into playing "a prominent role"? A handful of American radicals immigrated to Israel in the 1950s to escape McCarthyism in the United States. But there is no evidence of how many were Communists or how many were killed or wounded in subsequent Israeli wars. By 1950, the C.P.U.S.A., which had supported the founding of the state of Israel in large part because the Soviet Union had done so, was actively hostile to Israel and all manifestations of "Jewish nationalism," in parallel with a similar Soviet shift.

Nor, of course, are the two cases—American Communists secretly spying against the United States for Stalin, and American Communists secretly working for Israel—comparable, even if the latter were true. An American Communist who moved to Israel and fought in its armed forces was not violating any American law. An American Communist who secretly turned over classified U.S. government information to representatives of another government was breaking the law and betraying his country. Buhle's unsupported and spurious claim functions in *The Encyclopedia of the American Left* as a distraction from the issue of secret work by the C.P.U.S.A. on behalf of the U.S.S.R.

Buhle concluded his exercise in damage control by speculating that the collapse of both the U.S.S.R. and "the Cold War leadership of the American labor movement" might turn up new "documentation of secret relationships between Americans and either the K.G.B. or the C.I.A." Only in the mind of a left-wing extremist who equated Harry Truman with Joseph Stalin could American trade unions assisting an American government agency be equated with American Communists assisting Stalin's U.S.S.R. Buhle added, "as of the late 1990s, documents examined in the Soviet Union or reprinted for scholars offered little that was new in regard to illegal or secret work by Soviet sympathizers." In fact those documents have revealed a great deal that was both new and illuminating to anyone with eyes to see. It was simply that Buhle did not want to see, and so he shut his eyes and pretended nothing was there.

Buhle is not the only contributor to the *Encyclopedia of the American Left* whose ideological enthusiasms are far stronger than their analytical abilities or truthfulness. The editors display a penchant for authors whose preferred method of dealing with unpalatable material is to ignore it. One entry on Finnish-American radicalism reports on the thousands of American Finns, mostly Communists, who moved to Soviet Karelia in the early 1930s but conveniently forgets to mention that hundreds of them were murdered by Soviet political police during Stalin's purges. No Holocaust denier could do better. There has been no uproar about the lies and distortions in this mendacious reference work and no one has called Paul Buhle to account for his peculiarly creative facts about American Communists fighting in the Israeli war of independence. If he truly does inhabit the mainstream of the historical profession, it is in deep trouble.

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Steinbeck's myth of the Okies

by Keith Windschuttle

John Steinbeck performed a rare feat for a writer of fiction. He created a literary portrait that defined an era. His account of the "Okie Exodus" in *The Grapes of Wrath* became the principal story through which America defined the experience of the Great Depression. Even today, one of the enduring images for anyone with even a passing familiarity with the 1930s is that of Steinbeck's fictional characters the Joads, an American farming family uprooted from its home by the twin disasters of dust storms and financial crisis to become refugees in a hostile world. Not since Dickens's portrayal of the slums of Victorian England has a novelist produced such an enduring definition of his age.

According to Penguin Books, which produced a very handsome series of paperbacks to mark the centenary of his birth this February, Steinbeck's novels still generate a combined sale of around two million books a year. Originally published in 1939, *The Grapes of Wrath* remains a widely studied text in both high schools and universities, and the 1940 John Ford film of the book still enjoys healthy sales on videotape and frequent reruns on classic movie shows on cable television. The story that these various audiences hear goes like this:

Dust storms and bank foreclosures during the Great Depression forced a mass migration of hundreds of thousands of small landowners and sharecroppers from the American southwest, especially Oklahoma, Arkansas, and east Texas. Enticed by false advertising, impoverished farming families loaded their possessions onto ramshackle automobiles and pickup trucks to brave the thousand-mile journey westward to California where they hoped to revive their fortunes and regain their livelihood on the land. This American version of Exodus faced its own Sinai crossing in the Arizona desert, where many vehicles broke down or ran out of gas. Those who survived the hazardous passage to the promised land, however, found the large corporations that controlled Californian agriculture used the rapidly growing number of migrants to continually beat down harvest wages. Police and vigilantes set upon those who complained or resisted, especially if they were suspected of being "reds" or Communist agitators. The Okies ended up landless, homeless, and impoverished, forced to watch their children starve in a land of plenty. Folk singers like Woody Guthrie, in his Dust Bowl Ballads, expressed their bitterness and anger: "I'm goin' down the road feelin' bad. Lawd. Lawd. And I ain't gonna be treated this-a-way."

Although it is about the experiences of the fictional Joad family, *The Grapes of Wrath* was always meant to be taken literally. Borrowing from John Dos Passos's *U.S.A.* trilogy and other works in the realist or documentary genre of the time, Steinbeck interspersed his fictional chapters with passages that gave a running account of the

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prevailing social, climatic, economic, and political conditions. Steinbeck himself had researched the living conditions of the Okies for a series of newspaper articles he wrote for a San Francisco newspaper, and, soon after his novel appeared, its tale was confirmed by the publication of America's most famous work of photographic essays, Dorothea Lange and Paul S. Taylor's *American Exodus*, which traced every step of the Okie's tragic journey across the country. In other words, Steinbeck's book was presented at the time as a work of history as well as fiction, and it has been accepted as such ever since. Unfortunately for the reputation of the author, however, there is now an accumulation of sufficient historical, demographic, and climatic data about the 1930s to show that almost everything about the elaborate picture created in the novel is either outright false or exaggerated beyond belief.

For a start, dust storms in the Thirties affected very little of the farming land of Oklahoma. Between 1933 and 1935, severe wind erosion did create a dust bowl in the western half of Kansas, eastern Colorado, and the west Texas/New Mexico border country. While many Oklahoma farms suffered from drought in the mid-1930s, the only dust-affected region in that state was the narrow panhandle in the far west. Steinbeck wrote of the dust storms:

> In the morning the dust hung like fog, and the sun was as red as ripe new blood. All day the dust sifted down, and the next day it sifted down. An even blanket covered the earth. It settled on the corn, piled up on the tops of the fence posts, piled up on the wires; it settled on roofs, blanketed the weeds and trees.

But nothing like this happened anywhere near where Steinbeck placed the Joad family farm, just outside Sallisaw, Oklahoma, part of the cotton belt in the east of the state, almost on the Arkansas border. In the real dust bowl, it is true that many families packed up and left, but the historian James N. Gregory has pointed out that less than 16,000 people from the dust-affected areas went to California, barely six percent of the total from the southwestern states. Gregory blames contemporary journalists for the misunderstanding:

> Confusing drought with dust, and assuming that the dramatic dust storms must have had something to do with the large number of cars from Oklahoma and Texas seen crossing the California border in the mid-1930s, the press created the dramatic but misleading association between the Dust Bowl and the Southwestern migration.

It is true that many people left Oklahoma for California in the 1930s. This was anything but a novel phenomenon, however. People had been doing the same since before World War I, as the southwestern states' economy failed to prosper and as better opportunities were available in other regions. Between 1910 and 1930, 1.3 million people migrated from the southwest to other parts of the United States. In the 1920s, census data show that about 250,000 of them went to California, while in the 1930s this total was about 315,000. The real mass migration of Okies to California actually took place in the 1940s to take advantage of the boom in manufacturing jobs during World War II and its aftermath. In this period, about 630,000 of them went to the west coast. It was not the Depression of the 30s but the economic boom of the 40s that caused an abnormal increase in Okie migration.

Moreover, most of the migrants who did leave Oklahoma in the Depression were not farmers. Most came from cities and towns. The 1940 Census showed that in the period of the supposed great Okie Exodus between 1935 and 1940, only thirty-six percent of southwesterners who migrated to California were from farms. Some fifty percent of these migrants came from urban areas and fitted occupational categories such as professionals, proprietors, clerical/sales, skilled laborers, and semi-skilled/service workers.

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Predictably, they had a similar distribution when they joined the Californian workforce. Their favorite destination was Los Angeles, which attracted almost 100,000 Okies between 1935 and 1940, with about a quarter as many going to the cities of San Francisco and San Diego. Of the two major destinations for agricultural workers, the San Joaquin Valley attracted 70,000 and the San Bernadino/Imperial Valley region 20,000 migrants. This fell considerably short of their demographic portrait in *The Grapes of Wrath*:

> And the dispossessed, the migrants, flowed into California, two hundred and fifty thousand, and three hundred thousand. Behind them new tractors were going on the land and the tenants were being forced off. And new waves were on the way, new waves of the dispossessed and the homeless, hardened, intent and dangerous.

Steinbeck blamed the banks for their plight. Rather than allowing small farms and tenant farmers the right to exist, the banks fostered competition, mechanization, land consolidation, and continual expansion. "The bank—the monster has to have profits all the time. It can't wait. When the monster stops growing, it dies. It can't stay one size." He compared this inhuman imperative to the rights of those who worked the land:

> We were born on it, and we got killed on it, died on it. Even if it's no good, it's still ours. That's what makes it ours—being born on it, working on it, dying on it. That makes ownership, not a paper with numbers on it.
>
> We're sorry [say the owner men]. It's not us. It's the monster. The bank isn't like a man.

Ironically, for someone whose politics have been described by his several biographers as a "typical New Deal Democrat," Steinbeck identified the wrong culprit. In two separate studies of the plight of southern tenant farmers in the 1930s, the historians David Eugene Conrad and Donald H. Grubbs have blamed not the banks but the agricultural policies of the New Deal itself. In the early 1930s, some sixty percent of farms in Oklahoma, Arkansas, and Texas were operated by tenants. However, during the Depression they found themselves victims of Franklin Roosevelt's 1933 Agricultural Adjustment Act, which required landlords to reduce their cotton acreage. Fortified by AAA subsidies, the landlords evicted their tenants and consolidated their holdings. It was government handouts, not bank demands, that led these landlords to buy tractors and decrease their reliance on tenant families. By 1940, tenant farmer numbers had declined in the southwest by twenty-four percent.

In *The Grapes of Wrath*, thirteen members of the Joads' extended family set out in the one vehicle, including grandparents and grand-children. In two moving scenes, both Grampa and Granma die en route. Along the way, in-laws and uncles also abandon them, leaving Ma Joad, who is in her fifties, to try to keep the rest of the family together. This entourage would have been demographically unusual. Rather than large families extending over several generations, the most common trekkers from the southwest to California were composed of husband, wife, and children, an average of 4.4 members. Only twenty percent of households included other relations. Most were young. Of the adults, sixty percent were less than thirty-five years old. They were also better educated than those of the same age group who stayed behind. In other words, they were typical of those who have undertaken migration in every era, whether over the Rockies or across the Atlantic: upwardly rather than downwardly mobile young people seeking better opportunities for themselves and their children.

The most comprehensive historical study of the background of the Okie migrants was written by James N. Gregory in 1989. Its title, *American Exodus: The Dust Bowl Migration and Okie Culture in California*, indicates that the author did not set out to demolish any of the myths generated by Steinbeck, Guthrie, and Lange. This, how-

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ever, is what he actually does accomplish, especially in his account of the motivations of those who went to California. The Joads packed up and left for no better reason than a yellow handbill Pa Joad found saying there were good wages and plenty of work in California. According to later chapters of the novel, this was simply an advertising ploy by the "great owners" of California to entice more men than they needed to their harvest so they could reduce wages. Hence the Joads set out for a region about which they knew nothing. To find work, they could only wander helplessly from one location to the next.

Gregory argues that the real migrants were much better informed than this. Most had direct information about working conditions from relatives already there. Two-thirds of Okies interviewed in the Salinas Valley had relatives living in California before they came west. In two other surveys in Sacramento Valley and Kern County, the majority of migrants said relatives or friends had been instrumental in their decision to relocate. "All of this suggests," Gregory writes, "that the Dust Bowl migration was not an atomistic dispersion of solitary families but a guided chain migration of the sort very typical for both trans-Atlantic immigrants and rural-to-urban immigrants." Some families generated their own migration chains, sending out a teenage son or young male relative to explore California before deciding whether to follow him. Gregory provides examples of some young men who made several such exploratory trips west during the 1930s.

In the film of *The Grapes of Wrath*, Steinbeck's statement that people owned their land not because they had a piece of paper but because they had been born on it, worked on it, and died on it is given to the half-crazy character Muley Graves. His sentiments, and the injustice of the dispossession behind them, resonate throughout the drama. Again, however, these remarks bear very little relationship to the real farmers of Oklahoma. American rural communities have rarely been populated by the permanent, hidebound settlers that urban journalists and novelists have so condescendingly assumed. Southwestern farmers in the early twentieth century were highly mobile people who felt free to move about in search of better land or even to leave the land for opportunities in town. At the 1930 Census, forty-four percent of Oklahoma farmers and forty-seven percent of those in Arkansas said they had been on their current farms for less than two years. They were actually more mobile than the national farm average, where only twenty-eight percent answered the same. A 1937 study by a sociologist found that the average Oklahoma farmer moved four times in his working life, five times if he was a tenant. The Joads, who had all grown up in the same place where Grampa had fought off snakes and Indians in the nineteenth century, would have been most unusual Oklahomans.

A large part of Steinbeck's success with his reading public lay in his ability to merge deep, mythical concerns with the American experience. One of the reasons why his Okie story defined the era, while other Depression tales of poverty and hardship did not, was its theme from Exodus. But, once more, this part of the tale had very little historical authenticity. The road the migrants took was not a Biblical camel track but the comparatively new national highway Route 66, which since the 1920s had provided a direct route from the southwest to the California coast. Steinbeck treats the road more like a covered wagon trail than the fast, modern highway it actually was. In reality, if their car was in good shape, an Oklahoma family in the 1930s could make it to California in three days. Rather than taking weeks while yarning about their hardship with other travellers and singing folk songs around campfires, the real migrants slept en route in auto courts (motels) for two or three nights. While some used the highway several times in the 1930s to test job prospects, others did the same simply to pay short visits to relatives. Gregory writes:

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> Ease of transportation was the key both to the volume of migration and to the special frame of mind with which the newcomers began their California stay. The automobile gave these and other twentieth-century migrants a flexibility that cross-country or trans-Atlantic migrants of earlier eras did not share. By reducing the costs and inconveniences of long distance travel, it made it easy for those who were tentative or doubtful, who under other circumstances would have stayed behind, to go anyway. They went knowing that for the price of a few tanks of gasoline they could always return.

Even if all they had was an old jalopy of the kind that broke down, this by no means necessitated the tragedy implied by Dorothea Lange's photographs. Gregory points out that farming families had a number of options to make money en route. Some of them planned their journey to coincide with the Arizona cotton-picking season. Others who were less well organized nonetheless found plenty of agricultural employment along the way in the newly developed irrigation fields of the desert state. In the 1930s, Arizona acquired thousands of new citizens in this way.

This version of the story, in which agricultural migrants had many more active choices than the powerless victims of Steinbeck's novel, was also true of California. Although the state was hit particularly hard by the Depression, with the unemployment rate reaching twenty-nine percent in early 1933, its economy bounced back comparatively quickly between 1934 and 1937. In this period, Californian agriculture suffered not unemployment but labor shortages. At the time, Californian growers needed thousands of harvesters for their crops. In the San Joaquin Valley, cotton acreages quadrupled between 1932 and 1936. As a result, demand for cotton pickers soared and wages more than doubled. From forty-five cents for one hundred pounds in 1932, the rate for cotton picking rose to ninety cents in 1934 and one dollar in 1936. A new bout of recession in 1937–38 reduced wages to seventy-five cents per one hundred pounds, but this still paid twenty to fifty percent more than the going rate in the southwest. In almost every other industry where low-skilled Okie agricultural laborers sought work, such as meat packing, oil, cement, clay, machinery, railroad, and ice manufacturing, Californian wages were twenty to fifty percent higher than back home.

California also had a much more generous unemployment relief system: $40 a month for a family of four, compared to $10 to $12 a month in the southwest. Although paying relief to migrants generated resentment among Californian taxpayers, it was an important consideration for agricultural workers. It obviated the need to follow the harvests up and down the state all year and allowed them to drop their nomad status and settle with their children in one place, working part of the year on the harvests, part in construction and similar laboring occupations, and part on relief. The combined income from these varied sources lifted them out of poverty, giving them a modest but decent standard of living.

The social policy Steinbeck favored for them was quite different. He was part of a group of west-coast writers and intellectuals who urged Washington to expand the Farm Security Administration Camps funded under the New Deal. *The Grapes of Wrath* described a model camp of this kind in the form of Weedpatch where the Joads stay for a while. The author dedicated his novel to Tom Collins, a social worker who administered one of these camps and who was one of his principal informants about Okie customs and language. The FDA camps comprised orderly rows of tents with clean water and sanitation. They encouraged the migrants to form self-management committees to handle chores like garbage disposal and ablution block cleaning.

Most Okies who went to the agricultural valleys, however, preferred other options. "Little Oklahoma" or "Okieville" settlements sprung up on subdivisions on the

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outskirts of larger inland cities like Bakersfield. For as little as $5 to $10 down and the same each month, migrant families could own land on which to build their own houses. They constructed them of cheap building materials and they initially had poor water supply and sewage disposal and no electricity. However downmarket they might have seemed to other neighborhoods, who often resented their presence, these typical Okie settlements were still a long way from either the canvas lean-tos and abandoned railway carriages Steinbeck made his characters inhabit in the novel, or the prim government camps he urged the New Deal to provide for them. The great majority of real Okies voted with their feet and went to the private market to buy their own land and build their own houses.

Rather than a tragedy, the Okie migration was a success story by almost any measure. By 1940, well before the World War II manufacturing boom transformed the Californian economy, a substantial majority of Okies had attained the goals that had brought them west. Eighty-three percent of adult males were fully employed, a quarter in white-collar jobs and the rest evenly divided between skilled, semi-skilled, and unskilled occupations. About twenty percent earned $2,000 or more a year, a sum that elevated them to middle-class status after less than five years in their new state. While their average incomes were beneath those of longer established Californian families, their earnings were significantly higher and their unemployment rate significantly lower than that of their compatriots who remained in the southwest. In short, despite the Depression, California delivered on its promise.

It should be emphasized, however, that the received story of the great Okie Exodus was not entirely an invention. Instead of Steinbeck's 300,000, there were actually about 90,000 agricultural workers fitting the Okie category who migrated to and settled in Californian farming valleys in the 1930s. While the great majority of them prospered, a small minority did not. In 1937, when the problem of migrant homelessness was at its worst, a Californian government health survey estimated there were 3,800 of these families living in squatter villages of the kind portrayed in *The Grapes of Wrath*. This would appear to be the most accurate estimate of the number of people who experienced what the Joads went through. This is not an insignificant number, but neither is it a quantity that warrants being the received image of the Great Depression. This number amounted to about five percent of the dimension claimed by Steinbeck and gives a fair idea of the scale of exaggeration his book has perpetrated. If this is so, it raises the question: how did such a grossly false picture become so entrenched in the popular imagination?

The Okie myth owes its existence not only to the Old Testament but also to *Das Kapital*. Today, Steinbeck is known as an admirer of Franklin Roosevelt, a friend of Lyndon Johnson, and a patriotic supporter of the Vietnam War of the 1960s. In the 1930s, however, he inhabited a west coast literary milieu that was much more Marxist than New Deal. One of his friends in the early 1930s was Francis Whitaker, then a leading figure in the Communist Party's John Reed Club for writers. Through Whitaker he met the organizers of the wave of strikes conducted by the Communist-controlled Cannery and Agricultural Workers' Industrial Union from 1933 to 1936. In these years, several young members of the John Reed Club and the Young Communist League were regular visitors to the author at his cottage in Pacific Grove.

At the time, his west coast mentors also included the aging radical author Lincoln Steffens and his wife Ella Winter. At the height of the Depression, Steffens was one of a group of celebrated writers who produced the manifesto *Culture and the Crisis* in which they announced their support for Communist Party political candidates. Steinbeck had begun visiting the Steffens' household at Carmel in 1933 where he was introduced to George West, an

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editor at the *San Francisco News,* who later commissioned him to write the series of newspaper articles that became the genesis of *The Grapes of Wrath*. After the Communist Party proclaimed the Popular Front in 1935 to forge alliances with non-party identities and movements, Steinbeck joined the League of American Writers, the organization formed by the Communists to succeed its more militant John Reed Club. Steinbeck's first wife, Carol Henning, was a Marxist who took him to radical political meetings in San Francisco throughout the time he wrote the novel. In 1937, the pair made what at the time was, for those intellectuals who could afford it, an almost obligatory pilgrimage to the Soviet Union to inspect the "new civilization" created by the Bolshevik regime.

These kind of political connections were not especially unusual for a hopeful young novelist in the 1930s. This was the "Red Decade" in artistic and intellectual circles when many took Marxism and Communism seriously. The Great Depression had, for some, shaken their faith in the market-based economic system; for others, it had confirmed their belief in Marxist theory, which they equated with modernism. Among aspirant writers, Marxism inspired a great deal of experimentation in literary forms, including realist prose, newsreel formats, proletarian novels, and books combining history, fiction, and documentary. Many writers on the left regarded themselves as a "proletarian avant-garde," waging a "literary class war" against the establishment. They wrote novels, plays, poems, and songs about the strikes and the political conflicts of coal miners, steel workers, laundry hands, textile workers, and sharecroppers. One 1929 textile strike in North Carolina alone produced four novels in the subsequent decade. While much of this material was crude ideological cheerleading, some of the better proletarian novels included Upton Sinclair's *Little Steel* and Harriette Arnow's *Dollmaker*. The movement especially affected the publishing industry in New York. Many publishers, editors, agents, reviewers, and book sellers sought to transform what they regarded as the spirit of the age into a literary form.

Steinbeck's first commercially successful novel, *In Dubious Battle*, was conceived and written within this atmosphere. This book tells how a group of Communist union leaders organize a protracted strike among agricultural workers in the Californian apple industry. The experience of getting it published, however, soured the author's attitude towards party members. The manuscript was assessed and rejected by Harry Black, a Marxist editor at Steinbeck's publisher, Covici-Friede, on the grounds that it was inaccurate and that its less than heroic portrayal of the strike leaders would offend readers on the left. Steinbeck was reportedly furious because "some cocktail circuit communist back in New York" had accused him of being inaccurate. Later, the critic Mary McCarthy repeated Black's sentiments that the text was not sufficiently orthodox for a proletarian novel, a response that generated a life-long enmity between her and Steinbeck.

Today, these quibbles over Marxist orthodoxy might seem like splitting hairs. *In Dubious Battle* is a grim and inelegant work, but it does toe the Marxist ideological line fairly well, especially by preserving that theory's central inconsistency: a worker's revolution is inevitable but needs a vanguard of activists to bring it off. There was, however, a real disagreement between Steinbeck's temperament and the demands of the party. He had more faith in the ability of the workers, rather than the party leadership, to manage their affairs. That is why, in *The Grapes of Wrath*, he endorsed the idea of the migrant workers running self-management committees at the Weedpatch FDA camp. To apply a label that the author himself would not have appreciated, in the great debate over Marxism within the American left during the period of the Popular Front, Steinbeck was more Trotskyite than Stalinist. He was a non-conformist Marxist who eventually became an anti-Communist in

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the Cold War of the 1950s, a not unfamiliar American intellectual trajectory of the era.

Even though the author's more enthusiastic biographers would dispute calling him a Marxist, the text of *The Grapes of Wrath* makes it plain that he was both predicting and justifying nothing less than a proletarian revolution in America. In one of his nonfiction interludes he provides the rationale for the coming conflagration:

> And the great owners, who must lose their land in an upheaval, the great owners with access to history, with eyes to read history and to know the great fact: when property accumulates in too few hands it is taken away. And that companion fact: when a majority of the people are hungry and cold they will take by force what they need. And the little screaming fact that sounds throughout all history: repression works only to strengthen and knit the repressed. The great owners ignored the three cries of history. The land fell into fewer hands, the number of the dispossessed increased, and every effort of the great owners was directed at repression.

The development of the capitalist system, he tells the reader, makes revolution almost inevitable:

> The tractors which throw men out of work, the belt lines which carry loads, the machines which produce, all were increased; and more and more families scampered on the highways, looking for crumbs from the great holdings, lusting after the land beside the roads. The great owners formed associations for protection, and they met to discuss ways to intimidate, to kill, to gas. And always they were in fear of a principal—three hundred thousand—if they ever move under a leader—the end. Three hundred thousand, hungry and miserable; if they ever know themselves, the land will be theirs, and all the gas, all the rifles in the world won't stop them.

On their great trek, this is a lesson that Steinbeck's fictional characters learn as well. The preacher Casy, who plays the novel's prophet, muses over the meaning of the exodus:

> "They's stuff goin' on that the folks doin' it don't know nothing about—yet. They's gonna come somepin outa all these folks goin' wes'—outa all their farms lef' lonely. They's gonna come a thing that's gonna change the whole country."

By the end of the book, Ma Joad, who was initially concerned to keep the family together and to preserve their food and supplies for their own use, now identifies herself as one with all the other poor and oppressed.

> The stout woman smiled. "No need to thank. Everybody's in the same wagon. S'pose we was down. You'd a give us a han'."
> "Yes," Ma said, "we would."
> "Or anybody."
> "Or anybody. Use' ta be the fambly was fust. It ain't so now. It's anybody. Worse off we get, the more we got to do."

In other words, the Depression had taken the individualistic American farming family and turned it into a proletariat with a new set of collectivist values. Many of Steinbeck's admirers claim that he is an observer of the human condition rather than the proselytizer of a political position, but passages like the above are little more than Marxist wishful thinking.

This was, in fact, widely recognized when the book was published. Many Californians were outraged at a story they believed was a grotesque misrepresentation that defamed their state. There were a number of anti-Steinbeck public meetings organized and several angry pamphlets produced. Steinbeck's neighbor and fellow author Ruth Comfort Mitchell, wife of the Republican State Senator, called one of these meetings in San Francisco where she promised to write a reply to the libel and set the record straight. The sentimental novel she eventually produced, *Of Human Kindness*, how-

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ever, was hardly a match for her rival's ability to generate powerful literary mythology.

At the time, Whittaker Chambers showed the most insight into why such a piece of propaganda had become so popular. He contrasted the book with the film, arguing that the latter brought out the essence of what was actually a great story. Reviewing the film in *Time* in February 1940, Chambers wrote:

> It will be a red rag to bull-mad Californians who may or may not boycott it. Others, who were merely annoyed at the exaggerations, propaganda and phony pathos of John Steinbeck's best selling novel, may just stay away. Pinkos who did not bat an eye when the Soviet Government exterminated 3,000,000 peasants by famine, will go for a good cry over the hardship of the Okies. But people who go to pictures for the sake of seeing pictures will see a great one. For *The Grapes of Wrath* is possibly the best picture ever made from a so-so book. . . Camera craft purged the picture of the editorial rash that blotched the Steinbeck book. Cleared of excrescences, the residue is a great human story which made thousands of people, who damned the novel's phony conclusions, read it. It is the saga of an authentic U.S. farming family who lose their land. They wander, they suffer, but they endure. They are never quite defeated, and their survival is itself a triumph.

I think Chambers is right. *The Grapes of Wrath* is the only example of the proletarian novel to survive. Why *it* became the story that defined the Great Depression for America is a question that still calls for an answer. Why weren't other novels from this genre and this period—stories of battles at Carolina textile mills, Pennsylvania steel towns, or Appalachian coal mines—the ones that did the job? The ultimate answer does not lie in the proletarian novel or any other version of Marxist literary endeavor. The enduring appeal of Steinbeck's story—though not his book—is its application of a great Biblical theme to the experience of an ordinary American farming family.

None of this, however, has much connection to the history of the Great Depression or the experience of the great majority of the Okies. Rather than a proletariat who learned collectivist values during a downward spiral towards immiseration, all the historical evidence points the other way. The many sociological studies made over the last forty years confirm the same picture. In the 1940s and beyond, the migrants retained their essentially individualist cultural ethos, preserved their evangelical religion, and prospered in their new environment. In popular music, Woody Guthrie's Dust Bowl Ballads proved a bigger hit with New York bohemians than with California Okies, who much preferred Gene Autry and Merle Haggard. By the 1960s, the Okies and their offspring constituted an important part of the conservative coalition that twice elected Ronald Reagan governor of California.

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Surtees & money

by Tim Congdon

Money and literature have an awkward relationship. Most authors are very human and like to be well paid. Yet authors also have a tendency to distinguish between literature as an art form and writing as a way of making a living, and they put literature on a higher plane of existence than the vulgar and repetitive accumulation of wealth. Despite the undoubted genuineness of their private efforts to improve their own fees and royalties, many authors in public deprecate the materialism of modern society. In October 2000, the Institute of Economic Affairs, a London-based think tank, published a book on *The Representation of Business in English Literature*. In a foreword, the institute's director, John Blundell, asked, "Why does the novelist, the writer of fiction, spit at the market, despise its institutions such as private property and the rule of law, and try to bite off the hand that feeds him?" The book provoked some irritation in such publications as *The New Statesman* and *Prospect*.

But an argument could be made that the use of literature to attack market institutions was a twentieth-century mistake. There may be intellectual mopping-up still to do, but few now question the superiority of liberal democracy and the market economy to the totalitarian, planned, and state-owned alternatives. In this respect the twenty-first century is more like the nineteenth century than its immediate predecessor. Some literature of the nineteenth century may therefore seem closer to us than much that was written in the twentieth century. In trying to find a drama to comment on the bubble economy of 1999 and 2000, the British Broadcasting Corporation chose Trollope's *The Way We Live Now* in preference to anything written in the previous hundred years. Trollope's novel had originally been a response to the speculative excesses of the early 1870s, years when a burst of American railroad construction stimulated a boom in the trans-Atlantic economy of the day.

Robert Surtees[1] has much in common with two better-known Victorian novelists, Dickens and Trollope, and he may have had some influence on Dickens. (Surtees was born in 1805, Dickens in 1812. Surtees's *Jorrocks' Jaunts and Jollities*—a series of comical episodes loosely linked by a tour of parts of England—is said to have suggested the original plan of *Pickwick Papers*.) All three novelists lived in an individualistic society with low taxes and small government, akin to the self-image (although not entirely the reality) of modern America. They were not embarrassed by money, either their own or other people's. Surtees and Trollope accepted the inequality of

1 The republished works of Robert Surtees are available from The Robert Smith Surtees Society, Manor Farm House, Nunney, near Frome, Somerset BA11 4NJ, U.K.; telephone +44 (0) 1373 836937; on-line at www.room101.co.uk/r.s.surteessociety.

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mid-Victorian England as part of the human condition, and in Surtees's case he saw the inequality as the by-product of a game, the always entertaining moves and countermoves of the market economy. If people want to return to equilibrium after the stock market nonsense of the late 1990s and its crazy redistributions, Surtees's comments on the mid-Victorian economy will seem contemporary, as well as refreshingly funny and agreeably unsentimental. Surtees deserves to be remembered as England's anticipation of Mark Twain.

Literary criticism is often rather snooty about Surtees. In the third edition of Benet's *Reader's Encyclopedia*, his books are dismissed as "of minor literary value," although they are acknowledged as preserving "the spirit of the old English sporting life." Volume six of the *Pelican Guide to English Literature*, which covers the period from Dickens to Hardy, mentions him three times, but places his work in "the mounds of the talented, readable, amusing or historically interesting" novels, not with "the handful of 'great' novels." In many surveys of Victorian literature he is not noticed at all. But it is undeniable that, in one respect, Surtees's achievement matched that of the acknowledged leaders of Victorian fiction. Like them, he imagined a world—or, at any rate, he imagined an England—which was inhabited by people who are recognizably his characters and could not be the characters of any other novelist. So there is a Surteesian "England," just as there is a Barsetshire and a Dickensian "England."

Surtees's England contained a large number of markets. There were markets in horses, markets in financial instruments, markets in stocks and shares, markets in houses, even markets in matrimony. It was in and through these markets that his characters not only bought and sold, but also lived and died, triumphed and failed, and cheated or were cheated. Indeed, the hallmark of Surtees's England was that cheating was routine in transactions of all kinds. Surtees is usually seen as the definitive novelist of Victorian horses and hunting, but a case can be made that his writings are unrivaled in their candid, pitiless, and very amusing accounts of deception, fraud, and outright swindling. His distinctive subject was horse-trading, where "horse-trading" is to be understood in both the literal and metaphorical senses. Surtees was the greatest novelist of the fib and the whopper. To suggest that cheating was routine in Surtees is not to say that it was unconstrained. The extent of cheating was limited by law and custom, and—perhaps most important of all—by the sanction of social disgrace. But the markets of Surtees's England were almost wholly unshackled by government regulation; they had few official or quasi-official organizations whose express task was to prevent certain types of behavior between otherwise free individuals.

A fine debating point is whether Surtees's Englishmen and -women thought more about money than about horses. At any rate, the market in horses is the obvious starting point for a discussion of his attitude towards money. Before the appearance of any of his novels, Surtees had published *The Horseman's Manual* in 1831. At that time, just before the coming of the railways, England's bloodstock was a vital capital asset. Despite the rather general title, *The Horseman's Manual* was a specialized monograph on the law relating to the buying and selling of horses. Its focus was the law of warranty, the law—in other words—of the representation by buyers to sellers of the attributes of the things—whether animal, vegetable, mineral, or financial—to be sold. The book referred to and analyzed forty-seven common law cases, and would presumably have helped Surtees in his career if he had remained a solicitor. In the event his brother died in 1831, and he became heir to the family estate, with the leisure to write novels for his own enjoyment, as well as that of his readers. The question of how horses are to be described before, during, and after transactions became a perennial theme in his fiction.

The character of Mr. Sponge was Sur-

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tees's main fictional vehicle for displaying his knowledge of horse-dealing. *Mr. Sponge's Sporting Tour*, published as a serial between 1849 and 1851, has been described as "his first real success." In its early pages Surtees noted that "hunting men . . . are all supposed to be rich," but Mr. Sponge most certainly was not. "That Mr. Sponge might have lost a trifle on the great races of the year, we don't mean to deny, but that he lost such a sum as eighteen hundred on the Derby and seven on the Leger we are in a condition to contradict, for the best of all possible reasons, that he hadn't it to lose." In fact, Mr. Sponge makes a living, just about, by persuading other people to buy horses at prices well above their true value. As an excellent horseman, he is well-equipped to demonstrate a horse's qualities and to conceal its faults.

In his first major transaction he does a deal with Mr. Buckram, the owner of a strong but vicious hack called Hercules (or "Ercles," in the vernacular). Mr Sponge's bargain with Buckram was a so-called "jobbing deal." In detail, it was a rather complex rent-to-buy scheme, in which he has to pay an initial ten guineas a month for the use of Hercules, but is then confronted "with a sort of sliding scale of prices if he chose to buy." The price of Ercles is "fixed at fifty [pounds], inclusive of hire at the end of the first month and gradually" rises "according to the length of time he kept him beyond that."

Two chapters later Mr. Sponge has found his victim, Mr. Waffles of Laverick Wells, a young man about to inherit a large fortune who "had not the slightest idea of the value of money" or indeed of horses. After impressing Mr. Waffles at a meet of the Laverick Wells hunt, Mr. Sponge dupes Waffles's agent, the hapless Caingey Thornton, into believing that he paid 250 guineas for Hercules. He offers to sell the horse for 300 guineas. Thornton accepts the price and proposes payment with a post-dated cheque signed by Mr. Waffles. Sponge prefers a "stiff," which seems to have been a bill of exchange. Thornton agrees and tells Sponge "to draw at three months, and Mr. Waffles will accept, payable at Coutts." The bill is handed over and Caingey Thornton takes possession of Hercules. The phrase "takes possession," rather than "takes control," is used deliberately, as the immediate results of the transaction are both highly dramatic and very destructive, and are excellently portrayed in one of the R. S. Surtees Society's postcards. Hercules, for all his virtues, was not too much concerned about the legal niceties of ownership. After three "most desperate bounds" with Mr. Thornton in the saddle and two more for the hell of it, he "crashed right through Messrs Frippery and Flummery's fine plate-glass window, to the terror and astonishment of their elegant young" customers, "who were busy arranging their ribbons and finery for the day."

Surtees's transactions in horses sometimes involved the exchange of hard cash and sometimes of cheques, but—as *Mr. Sponge's Sporting Tour* shows—settlement was often in bills of exchange. Although the bill of exchange may be an exotic instrument at the start of the twenty-first century, it was a commonplace to the British upper and middle classes of the mid-nineteenth century. In essence, it was an IOU, with a promise to pay in legal tender (coin of the realm or Bank of England notes) at a future date. As long as the debtor had an undoubted ability to pay, the IOU could pass from hand to hand and be used to make payments several times before its ultimate redemption. Of course, someone taking a bill in payment would not be given full face value, partly because of the risk of default and partly to allow for interest costs. Bills three months, six months, or longer before redemption were "discounted," at times very heavily.

Bankers in mid-Victorian England could take deposits and make loans in the same way as their modern counterparts, but many of them were in a rather different business. They bought bills at a discount and made their profit when the bill was delivered for

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full value as it fell due. These bill specialists operated in the City of London, particularly in Lombard Street, where they were known as "discount houses." In some instances they carried out an extensive banking business, taking deposits from other banks and maintaining close links with the Bank of England. But often the bill specialists were quite small, having only one banking parlor which was in their homes. Two examples in Surtees are Mr. Hall in *Young Tom Hall* and Old Goldspink in *Plain or Ringlets?*. Surtees's views on the ethnic origins of this sort of banker were openly prejudiced and, to the modern liberal mind, highly unattractive. Of course, many of them were Jewish, but the Jews were not Surtees's only target. Old Goldspink is characterized as "one of the cautious money-scraping order of bankers, as distinguished to [sic] the go-ahead Scotch school, who run a-muck at everything."

Obviously, the activity of bill discounting required a robust preparedness to say "no," as well as a good understanding of interest-rate trends and an intimate knowledge of the credit-worthiness of particular individuals. Surtees assures his readers that Jorrocks's bills "were as good as his bank notes," but—in saying this—he implies that the generality of bills were inferior to bank notes. The uncertainties of bill finance made it an excellent subject for fiction. As the bill could pass through several hands in successive chapters, it was an ideal topic to sustain the reader's attention in the serialized novels of mid-Victorian England.

Chapter XXIX of *Plain or Ringlets?* describes "a quiet, innocent evening" in which Old Goldspink's son, Jasper, is fleeced by a gang of professional card-sharpers, led by the loathsome Mr. O'Dicey. After a few hours of very one-sided play, Mr. O'Dicey remarks, "Credit is the soul of commerce, and why not of cards? let us see how each of us stands, and then we can talk about settling." The card-players then resolve themselves "into a finance committee, and the process of IOU-ing and UOMe-ing" commence. At this stage Jasper's losses amounted to £4,000.

Mr. O'Dicey proposes—since he protests himself sorry to win money off young men—that "we all join in a double or quits toss." After various coughs and murmurs the cards are played. "Jasper turned up the Queen of Hearts, which O'Dicey immediately capped with the King of Spades, and, of course, the debt was doubled." O'Dicey's accomplices quickly find the stamps and other requirements to make the document legal and extract Jasper's signature for £8,000, even though his father had "charged him never to put his name to anything." So Jasper has written a bill of exchange, effectively against his father's firm, to the tune of £8,000—about half a million pounds (or almost $750,000) in terms of the money of 2000—after a quiet, innocent, and very expensive evening of cards.

Given the scale of the transaction and the audacity of the fraud, the reader might expect Surtees to discuss the bill's final destination in the next chapter. But he leaves the matter alone for several chapters, just as with a typical bill the debtor would postpone payment for a number of months. In fact, it is only twenty chapters later that the bill is presented to Goldspink's institution, the Mayfield Bank. Old Goldspink quickly understands what has happened and considers taking the card-sharpers to court, but he fears that the magnitude of the sum and the attendant publicity might precipitate a run on the bank. "At last he made up his mind to pay and be done with it." Ironically, a run on the bank occurs much later in the book and the bank goes under, ostensibly for a different reason. Nevertheless, the damage from his son's gambling debts must have severely undermined the bank's solvency.

Gambling makes an appearance in several of Surtees's novels, even if the fate of the Goldspinks and the Mayfield Bank was perhaps the most poignant. One of Surtees's more appealing characters is Mamma in *Ask Mamma*. Readers familiar with the novel will know that Mamma started life as Miss Emma Willing, a humble seamstress, who

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made a good first marriage to a wealthy merchant and became Mrs. Pringle, and was then widowed and made an even better second marriage to the Earl of Ladythorne. As a servant early in her career she found that "though fine ladies like to be cheated, it must be done in style." She also found that in dire circumstances—for example, after their husbands had gambled nearly all the money away—fine ladies might indulge in a little cheating themselves. After she joined "the Hon. Mrs. Cavesson's service late in the day, when all the preliminaries for a smash had been perfected, her fine sensibilities and discrimination enabled her to anticipate the coming evil and to deposit her mistress's jewellery in a place of safety three quarters of an hour before the bailiffs entered."

The alternations of fortune in Surtees's England could be drastic but should not be exaggerated. The mid-Victorians were not always losing money by being cheated, by having feckless children, or by gambling. They could in fact hold their wealth in a wide variety of forms, some of them very safe. Surtees's novels have an abundance of references to assets and to the problems of "investment management," as it would be called nowadays. As Britain's economy became richer, more cosmopolitan, and more complex, it became host to a remarkably wide assortment of financial securities and tangible possessions. In his imaginings of great wealth, Facey Romford conjectures that his uncle's fortune contains "bills, bonds, post obits, IOUs." The abolition of the Corn Laws in 1846 and the embrace of free trade led to the influx of an exotic range of consumer durables, some of which have retained value and over 150 years later are still being bought and sold as antiques. Mr. Jorrocks' villa in *Handley Cross* had a "Honduran Mahogany table" and a Turkey carpet, while its stock of provisions included "Copenhagen cherry-brandy" as well as the more familiar "Dundee marmalade."

Surtees's views on portfolio selection are occasionally made explicit. It seems he was a cautious investor, with a deeply ingrained scepticism about the latest money-making fad. The most fundamental choice in mid-Victorian England was among the safety of "the funds" (i.e., government debt, particularly Consolidated stock or "Consols"), the relative safety of land and mortgages on land, and the riskiness of equities and other asset types. Broadly speaking, the yield on Consols was a stable, predictable, and reliable three percent. This was not much, but—in a society where long-run price stability was an established fact—it was a real return. Facey Romford sought his first employment as master of fox hounds in the Heaviside Hunt country. It had little industry or enterprise, but the people enjoyed a solid rural prosperity. In Surtees's words, "they might be called a three percent sort of people in contradistinction to the raving capacity of modern cupidity."

Surtees gave many examples of such "modern cupidity," before his investors retreated to the safety of government debt or property. In the new speculatively built spa town of *Handley Cross*, the self-appointed "Master of Ceremonies" Captain Doleful has tried his hand at being a coal merchant, which was judged by Surtees to be "an unprofitable speculation." Doleful sold up when it did not work and "sunk his money in an annuity." (The annuity would have been paid by an insurance company, holding mortgages and government debt to meet the liability.) In *Mr. Sponge's Sporting Tour*, the Jawleyfords were embittered by their investments in railways, "at whose bright lights" the family "had burnt its fingers." In order to retain Jawleyford Court, they have to curb their expenses and keep them in line with their fairly secure rental income. On the whole, the 1840s and 1850s were years of considerable agricultural prosperity and rising rents, and investment in land generally gave better returns than investment in gilt-edged securities. Nevertheless, at one point in *Ask Mamma* Surtees opines "a man who has no taste for land or horses should have nothing do with either. He should put his money in the funds."

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Surtees was a significant landowner himself. It was very understandable that in the early 1840s he should be opposed to the abolition of the Corn Laws. *Hillingdon Hall* is full of entertaining characters and events, and remains a viable read at the start of the twenty-first century. It appeared in serial form in 1844, and was intended as a satire on the Anti-Corn Law League. The aristocracy feared that the influx of cheap corn would cut farm incomes, and so lead to a reduction in rents and the value of land. As agricultural improvement was one way to anticipate the evil, the novel pokes much fun at Jorrocks' efforts in this direction. Jorrocks had made his fortune as a London-based merchant in tea and groceries, but in advanced middle age his love of hunting tempted him to set himself up as a country gentleman. He bought Hillingdon Hall, described as "quite a specimen of the old-fashioned manor-house." When told of his rural neighbors' wish to elect him as Member of Parliament, Jorrocks protests at the cost of living in London and asked them to consider "'ow 'appy I am in the country, tendin' my flocks and 'erds, guanoin' and nitrate o' soberin' my land, and all that sort of thing." He nevertheless lets his name go forward as a candidate against the Marquis of Bray, who represents the Duke of Donkeytown's interests. The reader is led to assume that successive Dukes of Donkeytown have regarded the seat as a pocket borough for several generations.

The Sellborough election in *Hillingdon Hall* has not made such an impression on English-speaking culture as the Eatanswill election in *Pickwick Papers*, perhaps because Surtees took the satire too far. Agricultural improvement was a more straightforward theme in *Ask Mamma*, where Major Yammerton turns round an over-mortgaged estate by draining the land with the proceeds of a government loan and greatly increasing its productivity. (*Ask Mamma* was published in 1858, after more than a decade in which the free import of food had been reconciled with high agricultural incomes.) But—in both *Hillingdon Hall* and *Ask Mamma*—Surtees was frank about the ethical standards of the English farming community. In *Hillingdon Hall,* Jorrocks is cheated by Joshua Sneakington, his estate manager, and so brought to "the unpleasant conviction that there were as big thieves in the country as in London," including the City of London. In *Ask Mamma*, Surtees was more general in his comments, averring that the occasional difficulties caused by the repeal of the Corn Laws led tenants to renege on their obligations. In his words, the "probing of pockets showed that in too many cases the reputed honesty of the British farmer was . . . mere fiction; for some who were thought to be well-off now declared that their capital was their aunt's, their uncle's, or their grandmother's, or someone else's."

The discussion of farming in *Hillingdon Hall* and *Ask Mamma* reflected Surtees's own experience. According to Norman Gash, author of a 1993 study of "Robert Surtees and Early Victorian Society," Surtees took his place "among the more active and sensible landlords of his day." The references to tiles in the Sellborough election speeches were not rhetorical. The 1840s and 1850s saw extensive drainage work, often financed—like Major Yammerton's—by government loans made possible by the Public Money Drainage Act of 1846. The loans were available at 3.5 percent, less than the commercial rate. An evident implication is that the typical return on farming was well above the three percent received on government securities, but both land-owning and the pursuit of farming itself (as a tenant) were quite risky, although not as risky as railway or coal-mining investments. Land had to give a higher return than government securities and other investments a yet higher return still, if they were to find a permanent place in investors' portfolios. Part of the explanation for the excess return on these other assets was the risk of being cheated. There was an obvious need for lawyers to define and protect property rights, although Surtees was as

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cynical about their ethical standards as he was about other professions.'

Plain or Ringlets? and *Ask Mamma* are Surtees's most extended treatments of the marriage market. The central theme of *Ask Mamma* is—in effect—the choice of strategies for making a "good" marriage, where the excellence of the marriage is to be judged largely by the financial uplift enjoyed by the schemer. In Surtees's novels the female philosophy of matrimony is simple and unsentimental: women marry in order to maximize their living standards. One chapter in *Ask Mamma* has the brazen title "Money and matrimony." As already noted, Miss Willing (later Lady Ladythorne and the Mamma of the novel's title) had a good first marriage which took her from the position of servant into that of the merchant middle class and an even better second marriage which advanced her into the aristocracy. The son by the first marriage—Fine Billy—goes to stay at the Earl of Ladythorne's castle to learn about hunting in the county of Featherbedfordshire. Fine Billy is introduced to the dashing "equestrian coquette" Miss de Glancey as "the richest commoner in England," but Mamma writes to her son, "Beware Miss de Glancey. . . . *She hasn't a halfpenny.*"

In fact, at this stage in the novel the Earl of Ladythorne is still unmarried, and Miss de Glancey has eyes for him as well as for Fine Billy. Surtees does not give precise contractual details, but hints that some investors have even put up money in a scheme to promote a match between de Glancey and Ladythorne. Presumably the most important projected expenditure in this example of venture capital is a horse and fine clothes. "Miss de Glancey of Half-the-watering-places-in-England-and-some-on-the-Continent . . . had induced a part of England's enterprizing sons to fit her out for an expedition against the gallant Earl of Ladythorne under the Limited Liability Act." The reference to the Limited Liability Act may seem gratuitous, but it again reflects Surtees's interest in contemporary political and financial developments. Of course, the marriage market—unlike other markets—was a parasitic zero-sum game. To the extent that one party gained, another party lost.

Ask Mamma is cynical and materialistic about marriage, but at least Surtees did not mention specific amounts of money in the Miss de Glancey enterprises. In his search for a bride in *Plain or Ringlets?* Mr. Bunting does not take such a relaxed view of matters. After his unsuccessful pursuit of Miss Wingfield "somewhere in Cumberland," Mr. Bunting is sent a lawyer's bill, "made out in a rather vindictive acrimonious way," for £43.13s.4d. "So what with a twenty guinea diamond ring that the young lady had forgotten to return along with his letters and poetical effusions, together with the seven pound odd he had spent in equestrian exercise, he had got a long way into a three-figure note."

In one respect the prominence of money and matrimony in mid-Victorian fiction reflects social mobility. The Victorians were fascinated by good and bad marriages, because they did lead to large changes in personal fortunes and position. The triumph of Miss Willing in *Ask Mamma* may have been exceptional, but Surtees's novels are crowded with characters who leap or plunge several ranks in the social hierarchy because of the marriages they make. The theme of marriage between aristocrat husband and commoner wife appears in *Hillingdon Hall* as well as *Ask Mamma* and demonstrates the flexibility and openness of Victorian society. Big differences in investment returns are part of the reason for the changing distribution of income and wealth, but stakeholding and position-taking in the marriage market also play a role.

Nevertheless, the zero-sum character of the marriage market restricted the potential gains. From the point of view of society as a whole, the considerable effort devoted to it was unproductive and wasteful. Mrs. Thomas Trattles in Roseberry Rocks, the locale for the pursuit of Miss McDermott in *Plain or Ringlets?*, makes a living from

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taking commissions on introductions between possible marriage partners, "and was always ready in the mediating way, . . . to adjust differences, recommend houses, engage musicians or attend dinner parties on the shortest notice." No doubt the Mrs. Trattles of this world served a useful function, but there were limits to the demand for the services provided by such people. Surtees had no illusions about the ultimate worth of matrimonial intermediaries. Mrs. Trattles was "truly invaluable" for "fanning a flirtation" and "was frequently retained on both sides."

Mid-Victorian Englishmen and -women were well aware of the riskiness of their lives. Chapter XV of *Handley Cross* features a conversation between Jorrocks' servants and the staff of the Dragon Inn. They know that their employment prospects are unpredictable, their pay is likely to be late, and the probability of being cheated in everyday purchases is high. While conditions were therefore uncertain for those without property, enough has already been said about the investment risks facing the propertied Victorian middle class. England in the middle of the nineteenth century lacked social security to comfort the working class and financial regulation to protect the middle-class saver. People had to look after themselves, and they knew it. In Jorrocks' words to the Handley Cross hunt ball, "Honesty is of no use to licensed 'oss dealers. Every man supposes they are rogues and treats them accordingly."

To the modern reader, Surtees's England may seem tough, harsh, and unfair, but it has an important economic advantage over the industrial societies of the early twenty-first century. The lightness of regulation saved on two kinds of cost. First, it allowed society to dispense with regulatory bureaucracy. Relatively few people were involved in preventing other people from doing things which, left to themselves, they genuinely wanted to do. Relatively more people could therefore get on with doing what they wanted to do or—in other words—with actual productive work. Secondly, the costs of complying with regulation were negligible. Of course, dealing in second- or third-hand horses, like that in second-hand cars today, was intrinsically difficult to regulate. But—in the modern world with vast cross-border capital flows—so also are transactions in financial securities, but that does not prevent governments and official agencies introducing a vast apparatus of rules, rule-makers, and rule-enforcers to supervise such transactions.

The mid-Victorian age is commonly represented as the heyday of *laissez-faire*. The characters in Surtees's novels are indeed mostly self-reliant, self-starting, and self-made, however indifferent their standards of financial probity. They knew that they might be cheated every day of their lives, and that they had to be alert and careful. To that extent the need for government and regulation was less than in the twentieth century. No one living in early and mid-Victorian England could have any doubts that financial success—in the zero-sum games of marriage and gambling, and in the risky games of investing—was largely a matter of luck; the distribution of income and wealth was not equitable or fair in some abstract sense, and it most certainly was not a reflection of "social justice." But that did not stop the Victorians playing the exciting money-making games of a dynamic and growing economy. Whether they ended as winners and losers, they provided Surtees with the vast amount of source material he assembled in his wonderful novels.

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Inventing Claude Debussy

by James F. Penrose

There is a subtle temptation which leads a man on from mere disinterested craftsmanship, through a positive delight in his own virtuosity, to the exquisite private satisfaction of deceiving the elect.

—Hugh Trevor-Roper, *A Hidden Life*

The exposure of de Ternant began in 1947 with a letter to the editor of *Music & Letters*:

> Some years ago, when I was working on my books on Debussy, I was in correspondence with Andrew de Ternant. He had published articles in *The Musical Times* telling most interesting and minutely detailed stories about Debussy.

The author was the eminent French musicologist Léon Vallas (1879–1956), an early biographer of both Claude Debussy and César Franck. Twenty years before, while researching his biography of Debussy, Vallas had come across "Debussy and Brahms," "Debussy and Some Italian Musicians," and "Debussy and Some Others on Sullivan," articles written by de Ternant, a little known writer on musical subjects, in three numbers of *The Musical Times*. To the biographer, these articles seemed to be goldmines, filled with hitherto unknown adventures of Debussy's travels and recording detailed conversations between Debussy and a wearily matter-of-fact Leoncavallo, an unusually garrulous Brahms, an accommodating Arrigo Boito, and a rustic, sunny-tempered Verdi. Each of the columns was just a little over two thousand words in length, and, doubtless hoping that de Ternant might be the source of further revelations, Vallas wrote to him.

De Ternant replied to Vallas, explaining that his material emerged from conversations with Debussy in London in 1887 and 1895, and thereafter in Paris. "Very friendly relations were established between the two young men," Vallas noted. "The fact that de Ternant was French by birth helped to increase [Debussy's and de Ternant's] intimacy in a foreign country." De Ternant told Vallas that Debussy made him promise not to reveal the details of their conversations until after the composer's death (in 1918).

The result of Vallas's earnest diggings appeared in his *Claude Debussy et son temps* (1927, published in English as *Claude Debussy, His Life and Works*). At that time, it was thought that the young Debussy, after winning the Prix de Rome in 1884, had returned to Paris early, refusing to complete the obligatory two-year residence period in Italy. Much of this period, however, was "still veiled in obscurity," a situation that Vallas hoped to dispel. In particular, Vallas's biography revealed two previously unknown trips of Debussy's to Vienna and London. Vallas abstracted particulars of the Vienna trip from de Ternant's "Debussy and Brahms."

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As in his other effusions, de Ternant began by conveying his easygoing relationship with his subject. "Claude Debussy once said to me that every professional musician should write an 'autobiography' and that when he reached the age of sixty, he would himself commence one." After conveying Debussy's observations on musical autobiography and lamenting the fact that Debussy did not himself live to write one, de Ternant unveils a hitherto undiscovered fact: the famously ambivalent Debussy was, in fact, a celebrity nut. In 1887, he went on the musical equivalent of a Beverly Hills bus tour of the stars with the intention, de Ternant writes, of bagging "as many eminent foreign composers as possible, and his 'greatest capture' was Johannes Brahms." De Ternant told Vallas that after contriving an introduction to the "'crusty' old bachelor" through an unnamed female intermediary, Debussy, the lady, and Brahms enjoyed a bibulous lunch in Vienna. Loosened up by "several glasses of French champagne," the now expansive Brahms invited "his lady friend and Debussy to dine with him on the following evening. After that, there would be a treat in store for his new young French friend." The treat apparently consisted of a performance of Bizet's *Carmen*, which Debussy had never seen and which had delighted Brahms twenty times previously. During intermissions, Brahms regaled his companions with a detailed commentary and analysis of the work. Brahms later squired Debussy around musical Vienna, visited the graves of Beethoven and Schubert, and "inspected the famous collection of musical manuscripts and autographs in the Imperial Library." Debussy eventually departed Vienna after "the great German master embraced the young Frenchman like a son."

The London adventure showed a business-like Debussy. De Ternant said that Debussy visited London for a week in 1887 to seek an English publisher for his choral work *La Damoiselle élue*. De Ternant said that he met Debussy at the editorial offices of the *Musical World*, whither the composer had carried a letter of introduction to Francis Hueffer, the editor (and, coincidentally, the son-in-law of Ford Madox Brown, painter and friend of Rossetti, on whose poem Debussy's work was based). De Ternant told Vallas that Hueffer introduced Debussy to a publisher, possibly Novello, and that a reader considered Debussy's manuscripts "remarkable, but said that no English firm would agree to publish them."

This version of events was accepted for many years and repeated by other writers, even as Vallas noted that de Ternant's accounts were uncorroborated, and, regarding Debussy's sojourn in Italy, "[p]ossibly . . . romanced a little"—an understatement that Vallas would come to regret.

Vallas was not de Ternant's only correspondent. Edward Lockspeiser, the great specialist on French music (and occasional literary collaborator with the aesthete-traitor Anthony Blunt) was an even bigger catch. The most eminent of Debussy's biographers, Lockspeiser wrote an important monograph in which numerous de Ternant ephemera were incorporated, one even finding its way into Lockspeiser's very first sentence.

Drawing on de Ternant's "Debussy and Some Italian Musicians," Lockspeiser describes how Debussy (this would have been in Italy in 1885–1886) met Ruggero Leoncavallo (*I Pagliacci*, *Cavalleria Rusticana*) who, in turn, introduced him to the librettist and composer Arrigo Boito in Milan. By de Ternant's account, Debussy arrived early for his meeting with Boito, and, while waiting in the great man's study ("littered with magazines, books and newspaper cuttings . . . no sign of any musical activity"), made the snide observation that the composer of *Mefistofele* was more "literary" than "musical," a point reinforced by Boito then strolling in with the peculiar claim that he had just been "giving a lecture on the English Lake poets."

From Milan, the story goes, Debussy set out for Sant' Agata to meet Verdi. He found the great man "in his shirt sleeves busy planting salads with the assistance of a small

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boy." Verdi was jovial and good-natured and familiar with France and its composers—but would say nothing ("he felt he had made enough enemies," de Ternant darkly noted) of Ambroise Thomas, Gounod, and Wagner. After a somewhat abstemious lunch, at least by Brahmsian standards, Verdi returned to his lettuce planting, which appeared to interest him more than talking about music.

Lockspeiser then quoted de Ternant for specifics of Debussy's 1885 meeting with Franz Liszt, by then an old and frail abbé living out his last years in Rome. Cardinal von Hohenlohe, a friend of Liszt's, requested "as a compliment to French musical art, that Liszt and Sgambati should play Saint-Saëns's Variations for two pianos on a theme by Beethoven." Touchingly, "Debussy said it was the greatest musical treat of his life, and when he related the incident to Saint-Saëns, the French composer was much affected and warmly embraced him."

In yet another article, "Debussy and Some Others on Sullivan," de Ternant mentions how Debussy met the composer of *The Pirates of Penzance* at a *soirée musicale* given by the composer Augusta Holmès (once, incidentally, described by Nikolai Rimsky-Korsakov as "très, *très* decolletée), and thought Sullivan "the greatest English wit in Parisian salons since Horace Walpole," one whose conversations recalled "the 'maxims' of La Rochefoucauld."

This, then, was de Ternant's method: in publishing his conversations with Debussy, he purported, in pompous and self-satisfied prose, to supplement generally known events with interesting details of conversations, useful information regarding circumstances giving rise to those conversations, and insights as to the moods, demeanor, and impressions of the participants. These details were, alternatively, quite specific (as in the precise words uttered and the conclusions drawn), vague (as regards when, where and how the meeting took place), and, even within the same article, both. For those empty periods in Debussy's *curriculum vitae*, de Ternant places him in London, Vienna, or in the Italian countryside, then reverts to form by recounting charming, but odd, snippets of conversation, hitherto unsuspected personality quirks, and other peculiar occurrences.

Debussy's was also a richly contradictory personality and many of the incidents described by de Ternant, though surprising, could not be dismissed out-of-hand. Moreover, early records of Debussy's life were short of details. As Debussy's stature increased after his death, his admirers looked to biographers like Vallas and Lockspeiser to better understand the life and personality of the man whose music had moved them so. They, in turn, consulted the standard sources—interviews, correspondence, diaries, published accounts, including de Ternant's—with all their intriguing detail. The problem was that de Ternant seems to have made it all up.

Music fraud, like its more prosaic financial cousin, roots in ignorance, thrives in complex surroundings, and blooms most spectacularly when the victim surmises that he is a prime beneficiary of the situation. Compared to other hoaxes, however, the music variety tends to be less destructive and is certainly more amusing. This is possibly due to the fact that the target tends to be not so much the bank account as it is the ego, in particular, the *critic's* ego.

Vallas and Lockspeiser were not the only experts to have been gulled. In 1837, Franz Liszt once embarrassed critics when, reversing the order of one of his concert programs for artistic effect, he performed a trio by Johann Peter Pixis rather than the scheduled Beethoven work. The audience, thinking it was hearing the Beethoven, applauded madly, but sat on its hands when the real thing was played. No critic (except Berlioz, and he didn't really count) spotted the switch, and the incident profoundly colored Liszt's view of critics. In 1917, the English composer Philip Heseltine (a man who dearly loved his little joke) published various outlandish musings under the name Prosdocimus de Beldamandis, a writer on counterpoint who had died some four

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hundred years before. The critic Ernest Newman, figuring things out, published an amused article on the subject, but even afterwards Heseltine (better known as Peter Warlock) received letters from various musical cognoscenti that agreed with, disputed, or commented knowledgeably upon his nonsense.

In 1935, the violinist Fritz Kreisler admitted that, in order to attract larger audiences in the early days of his career, he had attributed some of his own works to little known—but nevertheless recognizable—composers. And more recently an obscure housewife named Rosemary Brown was able to convince well-known musicians that Beethoven, Chopin, and Liszt were sending her their opus posthumous works (in the truest sense) from the astral plane.

As biographers, Vallas and Lockspeiser had a different story. Debussy was still an obscure figure. While alive he was reclusive, a mild misanthrope, and a gifted troublemaker. He once proposed the creation of a "Society for Musical Esotericism" whose purpose was to keep good music away from the masses whom he felt cheapened and degraded it. Neither was his music designed for popular appeal. ("Debussy's music has the attractiveness of a pretty consumptive," one critic wrote, "whose languishing glances, anemic gestures, and perversity have the charm of one marked for death.") Research was further hampered by numerous family deaths and the composer's estrangement from friends and associates.

But there were many warning signs: de Ternant himself was not well-known; all the people mentioned in his accounts were deceased; there was no mention of de Ternant in Debussy's letters or those of his correspondents. Biographers of Brahms, Sullivan, and Verdi make no mention of any meetings between their subjects and Debussy. And what, exactly, was so special about Debussy's remarks that he required de Ternant to keep them confidential until after his death? Nevertheless, de Ternant's stories had a decent pedigree—they had appeared in a respectable publication and had undergone a modicum of editorial scrutiny. Substantively, de Ternant's accounts seemed to fill gaps in Debussy's life, the existence of which were little known even to specialists. De Ternant wrote authoritatively about other composers as well; nothing he published to date had aroused controversy.

One suspects, though, that it was the alluring perversity of de Ternant's descriptions of Debussy—as well as Brahms, Sullivan, and Verdi—that caused Vallas and Lockspeiser to bite. De Ternant's descriptions of Saint-Saëns's warm embrace of Debussy, for example, and the latter's fulsome happiness with the performance of the *Variations on a Theme of Beethoven* are an interesting contrast with the bitter contempt with which Debussy held Saint-Saëns and his famous work. The story of a witty Sullivan charming *le tout monde* in Paris is similarly at odds with his close identification with the socially lumbering horseracing set. And then there were those irresistible anecdotes, like the austere Debussy's tacit approval of young *solfège* students using the Gilbert and Sullivan operas for their sight-singing exercises.

De Ternant's brazenness was also an important factor. His assured and detailed reminiscences were persuasive. Though witty and talkative, he added to his allure by holding back information, waiting to be contacted by researchers rather than flooding the market with details. He played the part of the kindly oldster, recording for posterity his conversations with one of the great men of the century. And de Ternant played the game exceedingly well, always staying just within bounds, never stretching credibility too far, but never overestimating the quality of available information by which he could be caught out.

For the biographer struggling to reconcile a little understood personality with a complex body of music, de Ternant's nuggets were rich in promise. The writer Clifford Irving, who did hard time for his famous (and fictitious) biography of Howard Hughes, understood first hand that the most successful frauds are those that enlist the victim as accessory-after-the-fact. For the art

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dealer, it is buying the "Picasso" or the "Dufy" at an undervalue from the rube (who painted it) off the street. For the biographer, it is the telling detail that sets his interpretation apart from those of other writers. "They want to believe because it's such a coup for them," wrote Irving, " . . . [c]an't you see what an ego trip it is?" Indeed, de Ternant had Lockspeiser believing some of his yarns well after Vallas repudiated them. It was only after a more complete picture evolved that de Ternant's descriptions were seen to be grotesque caricatures.

It was never through any contrary evidence about Debussy that de Ternant was impeached. Vallas discovered the truth because of *another* journey to England that de Ternant described, one by Debussy's former organ teacher César Franck, that was even more bizarre.

Vallas's 1947 letter continued:

> Franck's granddaughter, who was only eight years of age when her grandfather died, but who lived for thirty years with the composer's widow, assures me that Franck never visited England. Yet some articles published about twenty years ago by Andrew de Ternant contain numerous and precise details of the great man's sojourns in your country . . . all [de Ternant's] details are minutely exact in a way that seems to exclude the possibility of fabrication, and yet I have never so far been able to discover any foundation whatsoever for these assertions.

By "some articles," Vallas was apparently referring to "César Franck and His Opus 1 in England" published by de Ternant in *The Musical Times* of July 1, 1925, and an even more notorious piece that appeared in February 1927 in *The Choir*, a periodical so obscure that neither the British Library nor the Library of Congress lists it in their catalogues. A paraphrased version of *The Choir* article appears in Volume III of Percy A. Scholes's survey, *The Listener's History of Music*. It is difficult to disagree with its wry characterization by Lockspeiser as a "masterpiece."

De Ternant's ("who had the facts from the composer himself") ribald description of Franck's English expeditions is perhaps best savored by first appreciating the essential qualities of Franck's personality. His first biographer described him as the "true successor to [Beethoven], both in the sphere of sacred music and in that of the symphony." Others who knew Franck described him as "serene," "holy," "rapt," "mystic," "devout," "angelic master," "Pater seraphicus," and "Fra Angelico." From this remove, de Ternant's description of Franck in *The Choir* as a wisecracking, pub-crawling cut-about who liked nothing more than to amuse his pedestrian English friends during country walks and fireside chats is only marginally less amusing than its apparent acceptance at face-value by Scholes and Vallas. Vallas began researching his biography of Franck in the late 1930s, well after he published his biography of Debussy. The awful truth about de Ternant dawned after Madame Chopy-Franck, the composer's granddaughter, could not corroborate any English visits, let alone the lunchtime boozing at the Café Royale or hob-nobbing at Windsor Palace that de Ternant reported. Other scholars would, in time, go on to prove that Madame Chopy-Franck was correct, that Franck never in his life set foot in England. (Apparently, the composer's aversion to England was such that he even refused to attend the wedding of his son, Georges, in Greenwich.) In the meantime, however, Scholes thought

> it may be of interest to British readers to know that Franck was frequently in London. He used to come in summer to visit Belgian relatives of his mother, at Streatham Hill. There was no music going on at such a season, but he fraternized with some of the musicians, the Irishman G. A. Osborne . . . a prominent London piano teacher; Brinley Richards, the Welsh pianist and composer (who wanted to secure Franck as an adjudicator for the Eisteddfod); the Rev. Scotson Clark, the head of the London Organ School (the staff of which he tried to persuade Franck to join); Meyer

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> Lütz, conductor of the Gaiety Theatre and choirmaster of the Roman Catholic Church of St. George, Southwark (where Franck would take his place on occasion); and Edward Silas. Franck['s] favorite haunt was the Temple Church, where the famous Dr. Hopkins was the organist, and where Franck enjoyed the anthems of Goss and Wesley, and also the Anglican chants nowadays so much despised by superior musicians.

Like Vallas after him, Scholes was apparently puzzled by the "true successor to Beethoven" trafficking with the conductor of the Gaiety Theatre, belting out hymns with out-of-tune parishioners at the Temple Church, presiding over choral singing, penillion, triple harp, and folk dancing competitions in Aberystwyth, or filling in for wedding-and-funeral duty (at six shillings per service) at a South London church. "There is at first sight," Scholes wrote in a gem of an understatement, "piquancy in the idea of the composer of *The Beatitudes*, the great Symphony, the String Quartet, and the Violin and Piano Sonata, consorting with the composers of [*The Shower of Pearls*] (Osborne's piano bestseller), *God Bless the Prince of Wales* (Brinley Richards's masterpiece) and [*The Torchlight March* of Scotson Clark]." Just so—but for the fact that de Ternant is setting Franck up for this below-the-belt shot: "[a]s a matter of generally forgotten fact, Franck composed a fair amount of music on only a little higher level than these pieces."

In their individual accounts of how they had been duped, neither the indignant Vallas nor the ruefully amused Lockspeiser tells us much about their tormentor. In fairness, though, there may not have been much to tell. De Ternant's tales were the zenith of an otherwise unremarkable career. His name does not appear in any of the standard music reference books or in any music histories of the period. He was born in October 1860, the son of one Joseph Louis Virile de Ternant, in Great Windmill Street, off Piccadilly. In the 1890s, de Ternant was refused employment as a music critic by *The Times* of London. He did, however, contribute to various music journals, one of which was *Music and Letters*, the same publication in which he would suffer exposure. He died in February 1937 in Brixton, a drab suburb in South London, some ten years before Vallas finally caught up with him.

In general, musical hoaxes tend to be uncomplicated. Liszt's reversal of the program order in 1837 had the unintended consequence of showing that critics who routinely took him to task could not even identify Beethoven's music. Malice aforethought was more evident in Heseltine's prank; though ridiculous on its face, it performed as designed by harvesting a bountiful crop of poseurs. Kreisler's reverse plagiarisms were more complex. Depending on whether they had been gulled, musicians were outraged or amused. Ernest Newman, the critic, fell for Kreisler's scam and bitterly attacked Kreisler. But the question still remains: why would anyone go to such enormous trouble?

Pecuniary gain is always the first suspect. In another sphere, the historian Hugh Trevor-Roper showed that the antiquarian forgeries of François Lenormant, the bibliographical fakes of Thomas J. Wise, and, most famously, the bogus orientalia of Sir Edmund Backhouse could be highly profitable. There has, however, never been much of a view that de Ternant was financially motivated; no one has ever made his millions writing about musicians. One writer, Lawrence Davies, suggested that de Ternant's motive was the debunking of swollen reputations. Certainly, those sly remarks about Boito and Franck support this view.

Davies's explanation, however, prompts another possibility, one which combines his debunking theory with de Ternant's own personal circumstances, those of a persistently unsuccessful critic and writer. In this, there lies a curious parallel to the life of another writer who, coincidentally, also came from foreign stock and lived out his life in the British Isles.

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Rudolf Erich Raspe was born in Hanover in 1737. Like de Ternant, Raspe was a talented, well-read scholar who, for various reasons, never was quite able to pull things together. His talents as antiquarian, scientist, and writer were undermined by serious moral deficiencies. After misappropriating and selling part of his employer's valuable antiques collection, Raspe escaped the Continent, barely ahead of the authorities. He settled in Cornwall, worked in an assay office adjacent to the tin mines there, and supplemented his meager income by publishing essays "in a spirit of light-hearted malevolence with which [he] avenged himself on the world," wrote his biographer, John Carswell.

Raspe's essays were assembled under the title *The Singular Travels, Campaigns and Adventures of Baron Munchausen*. A retired soldier, Hieronymus von Munchausen was a genuine figure, locally celebrated back in Hesse as a raconteur whose particular gift was the "serious narration of palpable absurdities." Raspe grasped onto this theme and published a number of peculiar and elaborate extemporizations involving the Baron. One such tale involved the Baron, in return for some heroic act, being given the keys to the seraglio of the "Grand Seignior" of Constantinople, another described how the Baron's cousin was conceived when a hungry Pope Clement XIV, on his way to Good Friday services, stopped to sample some oysters which so inflamed him that he sampled the oyster lady as well. "There is more than a merely accidental contrast," wrote Carswell, "between Munchausen, the fabulously successful man of action, and Raspe, the seedy failure; between the Baron, who strikes his listeners into dumb amazement, and the learned courtier who had never quite been able to make himself heard at all." The resemblance of Raspe's methods to those of de Ternant's is more than passing.

However unwittingly, de Ternant followed in Raspe's footsteps. Their motives, however, were different. While Raspe may have been "avenging himself on the world," de Ternant was more circumspect: it was neither the world, nor the composers, really, that de Ternant was after, but the reputations of their biographers. With his mastery of the period and the complexity of his scam, de Ternant in dog-in-the-manger fashion was showing his technical superiority over the experts he so easily fooled. Perhaps Lockspeiser's dignified account of the deceit was, in turn, due to his recognition that every dog has his day. While it is difficult not to sympathize with de Ternant's distinguished victims, one has to smile at the thought of de Ternant's mendacious inventions spinning their amusing lies and laugh at the credulity of some of the most illustrious musical writers of the day who accepted those lies—and asked for more.

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Poems by William Baer & Christian Wiman

Borges

So what did Borges think when he first learned
that Camões dueled and beat a Borges (who
collapsed to the bloody street) when he returned
back home from Lisbon in 1552?
Maybe he said, "Ah, blades, of course, why not?"
Or maybe, he wished that it was *him* in the heat
of the fight, self-assured and fearless, hot
to wield his sword, gracious in defeat.
Admitting, "If a Borges *has* to lose,
it's best to lose to this crazy Senhor
Camões"—even this young one, flush with booze,
this one-eyed no-account, long before
the sonnets, long before the going mad
in Goa, and long before the *Lusiad*.

—*William Baer*

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Sleeping in the open

The touch that for one moment seemed
Her touch recovered in his dream

Is as he wakes only the wind
Moving over his bare skin

And through the single towering tree
That seems to rouse, seems a body

Responding and subsiding now
As if the years had taught it how

To be both taken and to stay
By giving inward and away

Whenever stirred by a real wind.
Even the strongest of them end.

—*Christian Wiman*

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A field in Scurry County

Late evening, cool, September, the ground
giving its clays and contours to the sky.
The colors swirl and merge and fall back down
and for a moment, as the reds intensify,

I am a ghost of all I don't remember,
a grown man standing where a child once stood.
It is late evening. It is cool. September.
Pain like a breeze goes through me as if it could.

—*Christian Wiman*

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London journal

In the year of Jubilee

by John Gross

This year is the Queen's Golden Jubilee, and to mark the occasion one of the biggest British recording companies is bringing out a CD in which the principal song is entitled "God Save the Queen." It is going to be heavily promoted, with the express aim of reaching the No. 1 spot on the charts. But this "God Save the Queen" is not quite what it seems. It is a mock-anthem by the long defunct punk group the Sex Pistols, first issued back in 1977, and featuring such snappy lines as "God Save the Queen/She ain't no human being."

We have been here before. The song was originally timed to coincide with the Queen's Silver Jubilee, and reissuing it seems as much as anything an exercise in middle-aged nostalgia for the pop-anarchism of the Seventies. It didn't do much damage at the time, and it's unlikely to do much now. Nor, for that matter, are the "carnivalesque" antics planned by such fringe protest groups as Movement Against Monarchy (known for short—it's not a bad joke—as Ma'am).

But there is also a new vehemence against royalty in more established quarters, of a kind which was rarely seen twenty-five years ago. The *Guardian* newspaper has conducted a campaign since the beginning of the year, scornfully predicting that the Golden Jubilee will be a fiasco—virtually willing it to be one. Many local councils have created financial and bureaucratic obstacles designed to put a damper on the street parties that were such a feature of similar celebrations in the past. The BBC has issued guidelines to its staff instructing them to be more critical in their coverage of royal events than their predecessors would have been: to set the tone, it announced that at the height of the celebrations it would stage a television debate about the future of the monarchy, and its possible abolition, in which viewers would be invited to cast their votes for or against.

The death of the Queen Mother in March gave the Corporation a chance to show what it had in mind. Within a few hours of the news being announced, a BBC interviewer was pressing a relative who had been present at the deathbed for intimate details; another was asking whether the Queen Mother "ever felt that she had outlived her time and didn't have much to contribute." There were lots of other negative touches, and a prevailing sense of meanness.

What happened next took even champions of the monarchy by surprise. There were no Diana-style displays of grief (which would hardly have been appropriate), but there was much more public interest and involvement than anyone had foreseen, and a much greater sense of a state occasion, with the weight of history behind it, as opposed to another instalment in what critics like to call the "royal soap opera." Where a fairly sparse attendance at the lying-in-state had been anticipated, the queues stretched for miles, and though the *Guardian* and its allies did their best to explain developments

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away—by claiming that most of those paying their respects were tourists and so forth—in the end they had to admit defeat. The culminating ceremony, the service in Westminster Abbey, was a triumph of traditional values (words by Thomas Cranmer and John Donne rather than Elton John) and incidentally left many viewers marveling that a country which makes such a hash of its health service and its transport system could still stage something so immaculately well-organized.

Dying when she did, the Queen Mother made one last contribution to the monarchy as an institution. The response to her death has set the Golden Jubilee on a steadier course, and although, as I write this, the main Jubilee celebrations are yet to come, the auguries for them look a good deal better than they did a month or two back. They aren't going to be triumphalist; by the standards of previous royal jubilees they may well be a bit drab. But all the signs suggest that they will go off smoothly, and that they won't give the *Guardian* and its friends much to rub their hands about.

How much does any of this matter? There are times, if you think of what is going on eleswhere in the world, when royalty and its rituals can hardly help seeming merely quaint. But for Britain, the issues at stake are serious ones. The monarchy remains a primary source of social cohesion, and a buttress against political extremism, whether from the left or the right. The first beneficiaries of its abolition would almost certainly include the British equivalents of Le Pen and his National Front. (At present they only exist in larval form.)

But monarchy has other advantages, too, and one that has come to seem particularly cherishable is that in an age dominated by celebrity culture and media values it continues to provide an alternative source of patronage and prestige. A much diminished source, no doubt, but still strong enough to arouse resentment among the media elite—or at any rate among those members of it who pride themselves on being forward-looking and enlightened.

Such are the present bosses of the BBC, Greg Dyke (the director general) and Gavyn Davies (the chairman). As I have mentioned in a previous London Journal, both men have political affiliations and connections of a kind which would have been unthinkable in the BBC in the past. (They are both generous donors to the Labour party, and in Dyke's case to Tony Blair's personal election fund; Davies has served as a Labour advisor, and his wife is political secretary to the Chancellor of the Exchequer, Gordon Brown.) But more than politics is involved, certainly more than politics in the narrow party sense. The two of them also seem happy to preside over the whole culture of the "new" BBC. They are anxious to push ahead with current trends, and two recent incidents have thrown their ideals into sharp relief.

As part of a campaign called "Make It Happen," designed to make the BBC—guess what?—"more innovative," Greg Dyke has issued BBC executives with cards which can be held up at meetings when innovative ideas encounter resistance. Bright yellow, like the cards held up by football referees, they bear the printed slogan "Cut the crap." (We are some way here from the original BBC motto of 1927, "Nation shall speak peace unto nation.")

Meanwhile, at a big media conference, Gavyn Davies turned on critics of the BBC who complain about dumbing down and accused them—in contemporary Britain, such things count as accusations—of tending to be "southern, white, middle-class, middle-aged and well-educated." These same malcontents, he added, already consume a disproportionate amount of broadcast material, and their criticisms are often simply "a respectable way of trying to hijack even more of the BBC's services for themselves."

For many people the most galling thing about these remarks was where they were coming from. If Dyke is rich, Davies is seriously rich. A former partner at Goldman Sachs, he is reputedly worth at least £150 million. He is also undoubtedly well-edu-

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cated (first-class honours at Cambridge, a research degree at Oxford). And once they started digging around, Conservative newspapers had no trouble demonstrating that in private he enjoys a considerably more lavish lifestyle than you would gather from his carefully cultivated image of ordinary chap.

Faced with the outcry his comments provoked, he retreated a little. Yet the dumbing-down proceeds unimpeded. You can still find good individual programmes, even a few brilliant ones. But there are too many evenings when you have to search very hard indeed to find something that is worth looking at or listening to.

The most obvious decline is into coarseness and smut. Even as little as ten years ago, it would have been hard to envisage BBC television as routinely serving up such programmes as *Porn Star* and *Sex—Warts and All*, still less that the most heavily-publicized broadcaster on BBC morning radio would be a young woman whose confidences to listeners include the confession (or boast) that she urinates in her shower.

All that can be said in the Corporation's defence is that it is reflecting the standards of contemporary British show business as well as creating them. The BBC recently broadcast the annual banquet of BAFTA, the principal British dispenser of film and television awards, in which the host, Stephen Fry, treated the audience to a particularly puerile stream of jokes. Kate Winslet, for example, was introduced as "a woman whose pop socks I am not worthy, nor frankly disposed, to suck." And so on and so forth. Presumably nobody vets scripts nowadays: that would smack of censorship.

There are many other aspects of the BBC's decline which would be worth exploring. Some are hard to pin down, a matter of nuance and tone. Others are easier to measure—the drastic shrinkage in the number of arts programmes, for instance—though here, too, questions of quality naturally can't be discounted. The few big programmes about painting that still get shown, for instance, are mostly assigned to an amiable Australian entertainer called Rolf Harris, well-known for performing on an instrument called the didgeridoo. He's no Kenneth Clark.

The most paradoxical change in current BBC output concerns politics. The Corporation's news coverage is much more biased than it used to be—sometimes towards New Labour, sometimes towards points further left. (Its one-sided presentation of the Arab-Israeli conflict is particularly notorious.) At the same time its serious political programmes are being increasingly scrapped or downgraded. Greg Dyke may have his partisan views, but he is even more interested in ratings, and he knows that for the audiences he hopes to attract politics are a turn-off. A figure frequently cited is that of audience participation in *Pop Idol*, a BBC programme designed to discover new singing stars. Nearly three times as many eighteen- to twenty-four-year-olds voted in it as in the last general election.

How far the decline in respect for Parliament was inevitable, how far it could have been avoided, will be for future historians to decide. But meanwhile one thing seems clear. We will have to abandon the old notion that if the monarchy were abolished the natural choice for president would be a retired politician. What we plainly need is someone who combines administrative experience with a ready understanding of the media and pop culture. No, if a president is going to move into Buckingham Palace in a few years' time, it looks as though the perfect man for the job will be Greg Dyke.

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Theater

Ee-i-ee-i-o

by Mark Steyn

There's always room for one hit play on every subject. So the big question, as this Broadway season draws to a close, is whether Edward Albee has cornered the market in bestiality. At the Golden Theatre, it certainly smells like that, if you'll forgive the expression. Scholars may recall Rochelle Owens' *Futz* (boy meets pig) but *Futz* never had the feel of a big-time Main-Stem bridge-&-tunnel tourist-party bus-&-truck dinner-theater hit that in just a few weeks has descended on *The Goat; Or, Who is Sylvia?*

I first saw the play when I was wiped out by jetlag, so I went back to see it a second time and I was amazed at the assurance that had settled on the Golden in the brief intervening period. Part of this is due to the audience, which seems to have decided that this is the new Neil Simon smash that Simon himself no longer seems up to writing. But the rest is due to Albee, whose cunning framing of his topic seems to be rewarded with each successive performance.

You would think, would you not, that a play about bestiality would most likely involve a farmboy and his pa's prize Holstein. I don't give the subject a lot of thought but, when I do, I assume that, as with the Catholic Church's current difficulties, assurance of supply and ease of access enter into the equation. But Albee's *Goat* is a yokel-free production. The curtain rises—actually, it doesn't rise; the set's just there waiting as we wander in, a theatrical trend I deplore but which seems irreversible; "curtain up" is a critical theatrical moment that directors are foolish to squander. But, anyway, the curtain metaphorically rises and we're confronted by an elegant slice of New York real estate—modernist simplicity, tasteful hues, abstract art, primitive sculptures, Eames chairs, colonnaded walls of books soaring into a distant geometrically ambitious ceiling.

In other words, we're in drawing-room-comedy land, not dysfunctional-drama hardscrabble. There's walk-on applause for Bill Pullman (who plays Martin) and Mercedes Ruehl (Stevie), two actors vaguely familiar from films but not film stars. Pullman was the guy in a romantic comedy with Sandra Bullock and a warrior President in some summer blockbuster a couple of years back, but he never quite parlayed those roles into solid above-the-title stardom. He's full of tousled, boyish charm, even when, as here, somewhat harassed. Miss Ruehl is smart and stylish and with a smokey growl that's effortlessly sexy. They enter and begin a lot of glib bantering about a TV interview Martin's about to do. They're playful and acerbic, affectionate and witty, a perfectly poised verbal seesaw of a mature, comfortable couple. They wander into jokes about adultery, because they know and love and trust each other so much that the proposition is absurd. He's an architect, on the eve of his fiftieth birthday and at the top of his form—winner of the Pritzker Prize and the designer of a new $27

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billion "dream city of the future" about to be built out on the prairie in Kansas. One feels an urge to remark drily, "Very flat, Kansas," if only because, five minutes in, Stevie and Martin have lapsed into brittle, clipped Noel Coward accents so they can be even more amusingly civilized about infidelity. It's an atmosphere that simply reeks of good taste—except for the strange whiff that Stevie detects on her husband's jacket.

Of course, Albee isn't parodying drawing-room comedy, he's writing one. As their mock Noel and Gertie routine wraps up, Stevie asks Martin for the name of the other woman. "Sylvia," he says. "And who is Sylvia?" she asks. "She's a goat," says Martin.

Stevie explodes with laughter—Martin's such a riot—and wanders off. He turns to us and shakes his head. "You try to tell them the truth, but they don't want to hear it." Now it's our turn to roar with laughter. Everybody who comes to see *The Goat* knows it's about a man who's having sex with a goat. Albee factors in our prior knowledge of Martin's secret with the efficiency of an opportunist farceur. The TV guy, Martin's best friend Ross, arrives to interview him for a cable show called *People Who Matter*, and Stevie says she's off to the feed store. Ha-ha. Ross wants to know what the joke is. But he doesn't get it, not yet: an upper-class New York architect is cheating on his fabulous wife with a barnyard animal, and we're the only ones in the know.

Ross is a sore thumb in the dramatis personae. The demands of both the plot and Broadway economics are such that he cannot be accompanied by a TV crew but is obliged to serve as host, cameraman, lighting, and sound man of his little show. And, even allowing for the frugality of cable, the brief interview seems, if not exactly fake, then certainly a pretext, a device for ensuring the transitions of this play are smooth and seamless. Ross at times is little more than his turtleneck and blazer, even though Stephen Rowe gets some of the best lines and plays a crucial dramatic function. "How's Billy?" he asks. Billy is Martin and Stevie's seventeen-year-old son. He's fine, says Martin, and gay. They have a bit of chit-chat on the subject—it's just a phase, says Ross; no, it isn't, says Martin, but he's trying to be cool about it.

A generation ago this would have been the drama's big secret, but these days rare is the love that dares not speak its name and a playwright has to go a little further in search of the transgressive. The TV interview is aborted, because Martin is distracted and can't focus, and Ross starts to probe, to get his old friend to open up. Martin has never been unfaithful—oh, sure, there've been times, in the kitchen at parties, when some tipsy female has come on to him, but he's never been interested, never done anything, he loves Stevie and, God, they're still so great together. But then, just a few months ago, he was upstate looking at property. They'd been talking about getting a home in the country, so he was checking out some farmhouses, and suddenly he came across this fabulous view—rolling hills, the leaves beginning to turn—and . . . and . . . "and it was then that I saw her," says Martin. "And she was looking at me. With those eyes."

Ross is interested now. This is classic locker-room confessional stuff. He wants to know what the girl was like. He's thinking Daisy-Mae—dungarees, big breasts barely constrained by her checked shirt, straw in her teeth. Not exactly, says Martin, but she's won his heart, he's in love. The audience is howling now. It's not the bestiality, it's the situation comedy—the comedy of the situation: one guy knows and the other doesn't, and so the double-entendres and the misunderstandings just keep piling up until Martin shyly pulls a photo of Sylvia from his wallet and asks Ross if he wants to see. Ross takes the picture.

"This is a goat. You're fucking a goat!"

Huge laugh. Blackout.

The Goat is a brisk hour and a half played without intermission. So a minute later the lights are up and there's Stevie to reprise the closing line of the First Act: "You're fucking

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a goat!" But this time it's for real, and it's to Mercedes Ruehl's credit, in a play that gets so many laughs from "fucking a goat" and "goatfucker" and any combination thereof, that in the space of a line she can put enough pain and anger and terror into it to turn the play.

There's always been a certain level of public comfort with bestiality. It was a casual assumption of the Falklands War that it was fought for the right of the "sheep shaggers" to remain British. (The Argies have quite different exotic tastes.) It is frequently remarked of Welsh farmers that they wear Wellington boots because they're easy to jam the hind legs in. For his opening act, Albee has demonstrated that he knows how to, er, milk the subject for laughs as exhaustively as anyone. But what else can he do with it? Although he's in no hurry to get off his Simon/Coward shtick, Albee's play is subtitled "Notes Toward A Definition Of Tragedy," and sooner or later one assumes he'll get around to them. Unlike the pig of *Futz* or even the dog of A. R. Gurney's *Sylvia*, the goat is entwined with the very origins of our drama, both the original sex comedies and the serious stuff: the word "tragedy" comes from "goat song"; Dionysus and the Greek satyrs were half-man, half-goat; the goat can be a four-legged friend, a lech, a scapegoat. Albee's play gives us examples of all three—Sylvia, Martin, Ross—but it's in the deeper purpose of the play that the author has divided the critics.

I wouldn't have thought there were many New York architects having sex with goats. But, on the other hand, there seem to be thousands and thousands of Internet sites devoted to man and beast getting it on. I haven't given these websites more than a cursory glance for fear that, when I run for governor in twenty years' time, a week before election day the other fellow's oppo research team will reveal my extensive patronage of bestiality sites in the early years of the century. It's clear, however, from even a casual once-over that some of these sites get more traffic than, say, *National Review* does. Which suggests there's a bigger market for those interested in making the beast with two backs and six legs than for those into hardcore conservative politics. Given America's declining farm population, it would seem to be statistically unlikely that all these aficionados are engaged in agricultural labor. And, indeed, any farmboy with a computer is also likely to have some sort of rig he can drive forty miles to the nearest sportsbar in and seek two-legged companionship. So the balance of probability is that around the country there are at least a few fellows like Martin—husbands who, unbeknownst to their wives, are gratifying themselves outside their species.

How would you feel if you were Stevie? As she tells Martin, there are certain things you prepare yourself for, perhaps even half-expect: your husband has an affair, an affair with a friend, an affair with someone half your age. All these things are part of the known world. But a man who's having an affair with a goat is someone you've known for twenty years and don't know at all. It's Ross who has broken the secret, in a letter sent to Stevie. And how she wishes she could undo it, could rewind the day, to that moment before she picked up the morning mail, when her world was still intact. But instead she's trying to adjust to the fact that her husband, "a decent right-thinking liberal generous man, right now appears to be fucking a goat."

The jokes are still fast but they're furious now. Stevie reads from her letter, in which Ross says he felt it was better that she heard the news from a friend. "As opposed to what?" she wonders. "The ASPCA?" When Martin starts talking about the first time he and Sylvia went "to bed together," Stevie spits, "To stall together!" She cannot understand how, if he loves her, he could also love someone so . . . unlike her: "I am a human being. I have two breasts. I walk upright. I give milk only on special occasions."

He tries to explain. "She was looking at me," he says, "with those eyes. I've never

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seen such an expression. It was pure. And trusting. And innocent. And so . . . so guileless." He tells his wife he went to a therapy group—"Goatfuckers Anonymous?" she asks—but everyone there felt bad about having sex with geese, piglets, and so forth, that it was a problem to be overcome, a sickness to be cured of, and he realized he didn't feel like that. He felt *great* about Sylvia. As he tells his son, he's only been in love twice in his life—"with your mother and with Sylvia." He still loves Stevie, but this is something else, something transcendant. I found myself thinking of that old Tin Pan Alley favorite from a century ago, "I Love My Wife But Oh, You Kid." (No one sings it here, though one feels if one had brought it to Albee's attention early in rehearsal he would have found a way to work it in.) And, as Stevie prowls their living room hurling pottery, her anger is recharged by the realization that this is an ongoing relationship, that for months Martin has been oscillating between her bed and Sylvia's stall, between her sex and the goat's. That the great sex she has is with a guy whose idea of great sex is an accommodating quadruped.

That's an interesting moment. The sense of her own unclean-ness is similar to that which many women feel when their husbands leave them for another man. Not all women, granted. But the most intriguing structural element in *The Goat* is why Albee chose to make the son gay. Certainly, Martin and Billy feel free to compare and contrast, Martin chastising his son for his own hardly "regular" relationships and Billy responding that at least his lovers are two-legged. "Goatfucker!" he says. "Fucking faggot!" says Martin. Stevie apologizes for him: "Your father is sorry for calling you a fucking faggot. He's not that kind of man. He's fucking a goat."

Later, father and son attempt to reconcile, and embrace, but a familial kiss turns suddenly sexual. Just for a moment, but it happens to be the moment when poor plodding Ross walks in. "Sick, sick, sick," he says. "Is there anything you people don't get off on?" By way of response, Martin describes a father who bounces a young baby on his lap and finds himself "getting hard." "Is there anything 'we people' don't get off on?" he asks, in wonder. Answer: probably not. In a matter of moments we have slid from gay to gay incest to gay incestuous pedophilia. Just a hint of it, a frisson, but the baby speech was the only moment that elicited an audible gasp from the audience, though the revelation is not especially novel: a couple of years ago, in a book on a famous child-murder case, the author Blake Morrison revealed en passant that cuddling his baby daughter gave him an erection.

I mention this because this one short speech of Martin's exposes the cowardice at the play's heart. Something's wrong when the one shocking moment in a goatfucker play concerns warm feelings about sexual arousal by children. It emphasizes how Albee has gone to some lengths to avoid shocking us about the goat sex. Though Martin waxes rhapsodic about his "epiphany" and such, he tells Stevie, "I won't go into the details of our sex with you." What a feeble cop-out! Before the play's opening, Albee informed the gentlemen of the press that, as is traditional, "There's one thing I'm doing in this play: testing the tolerance of the audience. Testing the limits of tolerance." But the limits go noticeably untested. Though Albee's willing to go into quite a bit of detail about that baby-prompted erection, he steers clear of anything so vivid when it comes to the goat. Stephen Fry had quite a lively episode of equine sex in a recent novel and Professor Peter Singer, the celebrated Princeton ethicist and America's leading advocate of man-on-beast sex, is not short of specifics. He disapproves, for example, of congress with poultry: "Some men use hens as a sexual object, inserting their penis into the cloaca, an all-purpose channel for waste and for the passage of the egg. This is usually fatal to the hen, and in some cases she will be deliberately decapitated just before

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ejaculation in order to intensify the convulsions of its sphincter. This is cruelty, clear and simple."

Did that make you feel just a bit queasy? The point about *The Goat* is that you never do. We never feel Stevie's disgust, and so the goat sex remains vague, blurry, a plot point, not a transformational event. This, incidentally, is the way dramatists used to write about homosexuality. One thinks of Basil Dearden's 1961 film *Victim*, in which Dirk Bogarde is gay and his wife Sylvia Sims is so stiff-upper-lippishly reasonable about it all that you can barely figure out what the problem is. Likewise, Edward Albee approaches his New Transgression with, ah, kid gloves. The reasons for the untested limits are fairly obvious—the casting of Bill Pullman, so genial, so likeable, so unpervert-like; the direction of David Esbjornson, who lets the production fall into a comfortable comic rhythm that he's reluctant to disturb. The Second Act jokes should be different from the First—the characters are articulate and so they're using gags both to wound and for self-protection. But you ought to have a sense of the desperation and panic under the laughs. You don't. Ross is shallow. Billy is teenage. Martin, insofar as he's anything at all, is impervious—the only thing he seems to get upset about is Ross breaking his confidence: "I'll tell you what's sick! Writing that fucking letter!" He sounds like all those Democrats during the impeachment trial who got mad at Christopher Hitchens for "betraying" Sidney Blumenthal and revealing the White House's plans to trash Monica's reputation. It was the breach of trust, not the trashing, that was "sick." Somehow I don't think this is what Albee means. Only Mercedes Ruehl rises above the slick autopilot purr to convey the intensity of real feeling. Her Second Act exit seethes with love for what was and fury for what cannot be undone: "You have brought me down, you goatfucker, you love of my life. And I will bring you down!"

Later, the magnificent Miss Ruehl returns, and we meet, at last, Sylvia. During Act Two, Stevie and Martin found themselves bickering over the appropriate pronoun for his new love—one preferring "she," the other insisting on "it." Sylvia's belated appearance settles the question. It is a scene that aspires to the great redemptive power of classical tragedy, but instead seems more reminiscent of the more practical resolution of problematic, transgressive love affairs in mainstream entertainment—without wishing to give anything away, I was reminded of the subplot tidying in the current West End revival of *South Pacific*. Such is the world we live in that today's Broadway offers a dark *Oklahoma!* but a light goatfuck.

I'd love to see Miss Ruehl play this material under a different director, but I doubt I'll get the chance. "You have broken something that can't be fixed," she tells her zoophile husband. But it would be more accurate to say that Edward Albee has fixed something that was long broken: the oldest, most reliable plot in the world, the infidelity drama that every playwright, good or bad, British or American, Parisian or Viennese, regarded as basic bread and butter for the last half of the nineteenth and first half of the twentieth centuries. It is a measure of our times that in order to get any juice out of the form you have to replace the other woman with a goat. From billet-doux to billy doo, that's entertainment!

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Art

A celebration of painting in Boston

by Karen Wilkin

The most effective antidote to the dour astringency of the Gerhardt Richter retrospective this spring was probably a trip to Boston to see "Impressionist Still Life."[1] Before anyone says anything about the salutary effect of exhibitions with "Impressionist" in the title on museum revenues, I would like to point out that this one, at least, was not just another crowdpleasing potpourri of everyone's favorite pictures, but a closely reasoned celebration of painting as painting, as intelligent as it was delectable. "Impressionist Still Life" could, admittedly, make even the most jaded museumgoer sigh with delight with its assembly of tasty textbook icons and unexpected zingers, but at the same time, it allowed (or forced) fresh considerations of the role of subject matter in modern painting, the relationship of perception to invention, and even the nature of modernity itself.

The exhibition's impressive selection of justifiably famous Cézannes, for example, was itself almost worth the trip, but the pleasure of seeing these splendid, normally dispersed pictures in close proximity was enhanced by the comparable pleasure of grasping their relationship to other works by other artists in the show. Beginning with the densely loaded *Still Life With Bread and Eggs* (1865, Cincinnati Art Museum), and ending with a group of rough-hewn late paintings of skulls, by way of such iconic mature masterpieces as the Metropolitan's somber *Still Life With a Ginger Jar and Eggplants* (1893–94) and the Musée d'Orsay's rosy *Still Life With Onions* (1896–98), "Impressionist Still Life" offered a miniature survey of Cézanne's evolution. It was possible to trace the way this most rigorous of painters channeled and transformed the brutal energy of his early work into a slow, disciplined process of observation and reinvention, without sacrificing any of the intensity or ferocity of his first efforts. And it was also possible to note how profoundly Gauguin was affected by Cézanne's example in a group of the younger painter's "close-ups" of fruit, onions, and crockery from 1889, pictures that paid homage to the Aix master's acute sense of weight and mass while simultaneously announcing how Gauguin filtered that awareness through his own taste for superheated color and sinuous pattern. In the same way, the pairing of the Cincinnati Art Museum's urgently worked early Cézanne of bread and eggs with an almost equally agitated Pissarro of the same period, in a comparable earthy palette, was a reminder of how close the two painters once were and a stimulus, as well, to thinking about the debt even the most stalwart of

1 "Impressionist Still Life" opened at the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, on February 17 and remains on view until June 9, 2002. The exhibition was previously on view at The Phillips Collection, Washington, D.C. (September 22, 2001–January 13, 2002). A catalogue of the exhibition has been published by Harry N. Abrams (240 pages, $45).

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French modernists owed to Chardin. If in this context, you were disappointed not to see Cézanne's pivotal still life of the early 1870s, *The Black Clock*, or any of his weird orgiastic scenes with laden tables or servants carrying trays of refreshments, there were plenty of fascinating and sometimes surprising works by other artists to distract you from such quibbles: a glorious Monet from Dresden, a group of sparkling little Fantin-Latours, some first rate Pissarros and Morisots. But I'm getting ahead of myself.

One of the strengths of the show was the curators' broad definition of the term "still life." They took the phrase to refer not only to such traditional subject matter as fruit and flowers, fish and vegetables, glassware and crockery, but also to all manner of inanimate objects, from books to hats and shoes. They included, as well, images of people drinking tea and children daydreaming as long as equal time was given to the tea service or the like; statuary, potted plants (indoors and out), dead game birds, market stalls, an empty bird cage, desserts, and hors d'oeuvres also made the cut. This elastic definition didn't seem capricious but, instead, added welcome variety, wit, and a certain amount of surprise to the selection. More wit and surprise was added by the curators' thoughtful choices. Van Gogh, for example, was represented, not unexpectedly, by exuberant vases of flowers, but mercifully, not by irises or sunflowers; instead, you were treated to an opulent cascade of white roses and a spare little branch of flowering almond—"very Japanese," as Van Gogh wrote to his brother. To cajole you into looking harder at this painfully overexposed artist's work, there were two dark "portraits," one of old shoes, the other of birds' nests. Better yet was the wonderful *Study for 'Romans Parisiens'* (1887, Van Gogh Museum, Amsterdam), a casual arrangement of stacked books whose geometry, crisp drawing, and densely worked pigment invigorate a gamut of marzipan colors; for once Van Gogh's relentless brushstroke seems to be the result of feeling, rather than a manner. And among the Cézannes, as compensation for the absence of the Courtauld's miraculous *Still Life With Plaster Cupid*, here was his far less well known, more relaxed, horizontal version of the same motif, from Stockholm.

As installed in Boston (I missed the show's first incarnation in Washington), the exhibition began by contrasting images of domestic objects and food with extravagant explosions of flowers. What could be more conventional? Yet you rapidly realized that Manet's elegant composition of a chunk of poached salmon, a wine bottle and glass, and a bowl of lemons was anything but. Neither solely an homage to Velázquez's austere kitchen pictures nor an updating of the luxurious Dutch equivalents of the same period (although such precedents were certainly part of the equation), it seemed a timeless, brilliant disquisition on the opposing qualities of surface, color, texture, and shape. That is to say, the abstract, formal characteristics of the picture began to dominate, so much so that the painting appeared to be positively reckless, even "transgressive" in its fierce reinvention of a genre. (Eliza E. Rathbone's contribution to the handsome catalogue of "Impressionist Still Life" is, among other things, an excellent discussion of this aspect of Manet.) Of course, this came as no surprise to anyone who had seen the wonderful show of Manet's still lifes at the Walters Art Gallery, Baltimore, in 2000, where the case for his stunning modernism was unequivocally made by—among other works—a deadpan, frontal painting of a melon from the National Gallery of Victoria, Melbourne, regrettably not in the Boston show, which seemed to leave nothing possible as a follow-up but complete abstractness.

The lush flowers paintings, from Bazille's rather formal arrangement of bouquets on a quintessentially bourgeois hall table to deceptively casual groupings of potted plants by Bazille and his friends Monet and Renoir, all from the mid-1860s, posited ideas about the possibility of an all but all-over

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composition that would be fully developed by Monet decades later in his waterlily series. This selection also pointed back to eighteenth-century decorative floral panels and to Delacroix's sumptuous, but casual—for the time—bouquets of about 1850, suggesting how the implications of those prototypes were both explored and challenged by the younger painters' brightly lit paeans to domestic embellishment and home gardening. But just when you thought that you'd gotten the point and relaxed into enjoying how Monet's and Bazille's exquisitely nuanced, vigorously stroked hues conjured up sunlight on the petals of hydrangeas, peonies, and geraniums (well, really pelargoniums) without reproducing them too literally, or began savoring how well-served Renoir was by the layered frontality of his composition, the curators demanded that you pay another kind of attention to the works before you. In Boston, two of the most unnerving paintings in the history of nineteenth-century art were set side by side in the context of the flower pictures—Courbet's *Woman With Flowers (The Trellis)* (1862, Toledo Museum of Art) and Degas's *Woman Seated Beside a Vase of Flowers* (1865, Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York), forcing horticultural and even technical aesthetic considerations to give way to ruminations about similarity, difference, and the permutations of nineteenth-century realism.

The Courbet, benign and anecdotal at first acquaintance, with closer viewing quickly ceased to be a slightly stagey image of a woman picking flowers and turned into a downright peculiar construction in which a carefully arranged bouquet of cottage blooms, apparently set indoors, fought for space with a wholly artificial figure of a woman with upraised arms, seen outdoors, against a blue sky. So much for Courbet's vaunted truth to nature, although I will grant you the virtuoso naturalism of the intricately rendered, twining flowers on the trellis and the flamboyant bouquet, and the contrast of this vegetable abundance with the restrained floral pattern on the woman's dark dress. The Degas, a picture that is anything but benign and only tenuously anecdotal (the casually disposed gloves and clippers beside the over-scaled bouquet can be read to imply a recent return from the garden), became even more disquieting when seen beside Courbet's odd, unforgettable composition. That the Degas packs a psychological wallop is undeniable, whether you attribute it to the uneasy coexistence of the introspective sitter and the huge blocky mass of asters or to the woman's sideways gaze outside the boundaries of the picture. The crisply architectural composition, which fuses the figure and the minimal details of setting and table into a kind of geometric border, adds to the tension by framing and squeezing the bursting bouquet, while the tapestry-like, brushy surface of the flowers cancels out the painter's dazzling, seemingly effortless illusionism. Among his contemporaries and beside the Courbet, Degas—as always—appeared to be both typical of his time and entirely, inexplicably, individual. (Not to be outdone for strangeness, Courbet soon came completely into his own a little later, with a group of the murky, brooding paintings of fruit and flowers executed around the time of his imprisonment for his role in the Paris Commune and the destruction of the column in the Place Vendôme. Not to mention that weird picture of a coy young blonde dangling a stick of dead seagulls down her back, an astonishing orchestration of pale hues and flickering textures.)

The early portions of the show also included some glorious Manets: a brilliant spray of peonies from the Musée d'Orsay, the Boston Museum's basket of dusty plums in rococo hues of pale green, pink, blue, and yellow, and, from a private collection, an homage to his friend Berthe Morisot—a bouquet of violets whose swelling form plays against the sharp edges of a crisp white note and the narrow triangle of a cinnabar red fan to form a glittering little near-abstraction. Perhaps the biggest surprise of the early part of the show was a seldom-

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seen early Monet, *Jar Of Peaches* (1866, Staatliche Kunstsammlungen, Dresden), a small, golden-hued picture that seemed startlingly modern, with its boldly cropped vertical jar of fruit and low viewpoint. Yet its forthrightness and domestic modesty also clearly demonstrated Monet's debt to Chardin, while the way the peaches were reflected in an aggressively veined marble table seemed to anticipate the young painter's future fascination with reflections of clouds and waterlilies on the surface of a pond.

It was obviously possible to enjoy "Impressionist Still Life" for its abundant visual seductions, to revel in the confrontation of fruit, damask, pottery, and glass, and savor the orchestration of colors and textures. It was possible to note how specific, identifiable flowers could be described meticulously by a youthful Monet, Bazille, or Renoir, in the years of their close friendship, or how equally specific, identifiable blossoms could be conjured up with a few perfectly placed loose touches by a terminally ill Manet. Still life is, of course, the most abstract of categories, the most divorced from narrative (which is not to deny that objects can be chosen for symbolic or associative meanings). Still life allows the painter to concentrate on "pure" form, to fix attention on the convex and the concave, the globular and the elongated, to contrast the smooth and the rough, the soft and shaggy and the geometric. It's a truism that traditional academic values assigned a minor place to still-life painters, denigrating them both for depicting inanimate objects and for "merely" copying nature, in contrast to history painters, who were admired for being able to invent compositions of large-scale figures enacting significant moments from the past by following the precedents set by the masters of antiquity and the Renaissance. (Chardin, obviously, was an exception to this system of values—as the recent retrospective made clear—although he himself was apparently so ambiguous about being acclaimed as a master of still-life motifs that he tried his hand at genre painting, a step up in the academic hierarchy, and wanted his son to be a history painter.) Since part of the modernity of the generation of painters who came to be known as Impressionists took the form of painting directly from observation (something they learned, to some extent, from Corot and the Barbizon painters), it's not surprising that they should have embraced still life as a theme. Not only did still life allow them to think about how to paint rather than what to paint, but for impoverished young artists living in Northern France, the merits of working from a table top set-up over hiring models to pose or working out of doors in inclement weather are obvious.

The Impressionist painters' modernism was not a wholesale rejection of the past, however, but rather a selective rejection of the debased notions of traditional excellences fostered by the nineteenth-century academies. As "Impressionist Still Life" made clear, even the most daring "New Painters," as they were first known, were usually indebted to the long tradition of still-life painting, not only to Chardin's paradoxically sensuous and severe example or to Velázquez's plainspoken approach, as I've already noted, but sometimes to the sumptuous objects of the Dutch or the musical instruments and baskets of fruit of Northern Italy, to memento mori or allegories of the senses, rococo trophies, and much more. Closer to their own time, Delacroix's late flower paintings, which seem to have been a way of refreshing himself, a return to intimacy while working on monumental commissions, set a new standard of simultaneous opulence and informality. Yet, in the end, the show made it obvious that the Impressionist still life differed from most of these antecedents. Like the images of the boulevards or the distillations of spectacles with which the "New Painters" evoked their experience of modern life, the Impressionist still life can often be read as a fragment or emblem of that exterior, public world, seen up close, perhaps domesticated—"*Jour la maison, nuit*

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la rue." Modern-day viewers can ignore the iconography, of course, and concentrate on the deliciousness—say—of the purple violets and the red stick of the fan in Manet's tribute to Morisot. But attentive viewing (and an excellent catalogue) confirm that there was far more at stake than seems immediately apparent in these deceptively straightforward works.

Other subtexts? Gastronomy, for one. One gallery in Boston was a tribute to French cuisine, an examination of how the most adventurous Parisian painters of the second half of the nineteenth century responded to market displays, game birds, oysters, fish, asparagus, piles of fruit and nuts, pastries, and even a decorous tea party. This witty installation resisted the temptation to lead viewers on an obvious path from shopping to dessert, but it did offer a complete tour of the visual possibilities of the raw and the cooked. Class distinction was another sub-theme, implied by the contrast between images of luxury food, old shoes, elegant silver, an exotic tea service, and commonplace wine bottles. But perhaps the most rewarding sub-theme of "Impressionist Still Life" was the exhibition's revelation of an unfamiliar side of familiar painters and of the excellences of lesser-known artists. Pissarro turns out to have been a terrific still-life painter, as evidenced by, among other engaging works, a tough, creamy picture of an aggressively round basket of fruit, thrust forward by the broad repetitive verticals of wallpaper stripes. Morisot and Bazille looked strong. Renoir acquitted himself well by avoiding the saccharine over-ripeness and inert surfaces that so often plagued him. (I said it was a well-chosen show.) A Gauguin of a sliced ham was a treat, all luminous color and abrupt intersections of frontal planes, and so was a series of small, tightly focused Fantin-Latours, especially a little gem of a white cup and saucer with a silver spoon, glowing against a radiant dark ground.

The most poignant aspect of the show, however, was the contrast between two groupings of late works by two of the great masters of Impressionist still life: a selection of the intimate, astonishingly vigorous pictures Manet painted from the flowers sent to him by his friends in his last years, when he was too ill to leave his house, and a trio of the sober, intense studies of skulls painted by Cézanne during the five years before his death. The brio, energy, and acuteness of the Manets, like their fresh color and their direct, economical deployment of broad strokes, seemed a defiance of the debilitating illness that killed him; the tension of the uncompromising Cézannes, the apparent battle between dispassionate observation and passionate feeling, seemed at once a summing-up of the trajectory of his art and a meditation on the realities of his own deteriorating health. As in the rest of the works in "Impressionist Still Life," these potent last efforts were free of irony, detachment, and cynicism. Quite the opposite. Manet and Cézanne's late works bore witness to their authors' unshakable faith in the importance and power of good painting. It's useful to be reminded of that, these days.

Exhibition note

"Stuart Davis: Major Late Paintings"
at Salander-O'Reilly Galleries,
New York. April 9–May 11, 2002

Lines broad and narrow, rectangles, trapezoids, triangles, parallelograms, columns, circles, planes, and words; shapes named and eccentric, lines as shapes, words as shapes, words as lines; simple, unmodulated reds, yellows, blues, greens, oranges, and pinks; black. Cool, unemotional, and concerned with the objectivity—the universal appeal—of these most basic elements of pictorial space, the painter Stuart Davis (1892–1964) reminds me less of other painters than of T. S. Eliot. Both were intellectually formalist and temperamentally possessed of a reticence animated in their work by bursts of a sort of vaudevillian mania. Along with other modern contemporaries,

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both men reveled in the poetry of signage, jazz dissonance, the fecund appositions of sedate, old-world craft and the speedy, electrified innovations of the mechanical age. Both were cosmopolitans, at home with European ideas and art. And, in contrast to so many visual artists, Davis was verbally articulate, capable of an epigrammatic felicity and humor worthy of a poet: "A degree of sentimentality can be tolerated in people, but in painting the words bathetic and emetic are synonymous."

To see the sixteen "major late paintings" together in Salander-O'Reilly's typically marvelous show was to realize how underrated this nevertheless highly esteemed artist still is. His work stands apart from that of other early American modernists in, among other things, the specificity of its look—no one, I think, could mistake a Davis for someone else's painting. He managed to transcend the impersonality of his means to create wholly original works, personal as a profile. Yet, within that particularized style, Davis found manifold avenues for variation. Compare, for instance, the two canvases on view from the forties. *Arboretum By Flashbulb* (1942), an all-over abstraction dense with incident, jams irregular shapes in red, green, orange, and yellow together with what one might call negative-space shapes in black and white; geometric patterns—rectangular boxes, circles—with softer, natural patterns such as crescents and semicircles, stars and biomorphic forms. Equally abstract, though calmer, meditative, *Max #2* (1949) restores the relationship of figure to ground in a flat, depthless space. Centered against a midtone pink plane, triangles, rectangular bands, and thick lines harmonize, seem almost to blink, in yellow, light blue, a warmer pink, tan, black, and white; a blue circle hovers impassively toward the top. One could say the two works result from different perceptual velocities, though each is the product of an utterly realized compositional sense.

Davis, by the way, eschewed the term "abstraction," referring to his work as Color-Space Compositions, arrived at by wrestling "with the obstinate physical laws of three-dimensional Color-Space Design on a two-dimensional surface." One can hear in this idiosyncratic vocabulary an immoderate concern for design and formal values. Indeed, during the period covered by this show, Davis was at times criticized for being overly decorative, unwilling to indulge in expressive accents. Clement Greenberg lobbed backhanded compliments at him, saying Davis had "made modern art cheerful," that he was "a superb wall-decorator."

Cheerful he was, and funny too. His titles have something of the poet Frank O'Hara's off-hand and mischievous humor: *Owh! in San Paö*, *Rapt at Rappaport's*, *Something on the 8 Ball*. Certainly he was one of the first American artists to use the decorative possibilities of words and numbers. So enamored was Davis of the shape of words, their graphic power, that eventually his own signature became part of his compositions, as in *Cliché* (1955), where a black dash introduces the signature at the top of a red field molded into shapes by black lines of varying thickness and direction. Of course, commercial signs were the primary influence on Davis's inclusion of words in his paintings, but I also detect the impact of graffiti on his lexical obsession. Anachronistic as the comparison may be, I can't help pointing out the similarity between his cursive words and calligraphic scribbles—in, for example, *Something on the 8 Ball* and *Unfinished Business*—and the urban street tags one sees spray-painted on walls today—they share a common lineage. (Bear in mind, graffiti is older than Rome.) Still, insisting on the forms of words to the exclusion of their meaning seems disingenuous. When Davis wrote "I have used words in many of my pictures, and in all cases they are used in the same sense and feeling as the nonword shapes," he was, I feel, trying to mitigate the way words can distract one from the strictly pictorial qualities of a given work. He did not, however, choose words solely for the shape they made. The NOW that appears in

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Owh! in San Paö has as much to do with sonic rhyme as visual felicity; in other pictures, certain words are juxtaposed for ironic effect, as in the pairing of COW and FREE as well as the conglomeration of NEW, JUICE, 100%, and CAT in *Première* (1957). Certainly the phrase LINES THICKEN, painted in the red border of *Paris Bit* (1959), is meant to be read in addition to ornamenting this work in which white shapes outlined in black play off black shapes outlined in white.

That Davis attended to the resonance of words does not, I believe, make him any less of a modernist, although it makes him less of an extremist than a Malevich or a Rothko. It does, however, point to the extraordinary influence he had, and continues to have, on subsequent American art, from Johns and Rauschenberg to Pop to the neo-Pop styles in evidence today—not that I'd want to compare the artistic achievements, the quality, of these later artists and movements with Davis's far more significant contribution.

Two of the works at Salander provide a glimmer of insight into how this incomparable painter proceeded to that achievement. Briefly, *Study for and Aft "Little Giant Still Life"* (1950–53) shows the artist establishing the composition and content of the picture, while the colors—in oil and Tri-Tec—remain at this stage impure, so that the underpainting comes through. Comparing this study to the other works on view, with their solid blocks of color and hard edges, allows us to see how important the tight juxtaposition of solid, pure colors is to the finished works. *Fin (Last Painting)*, which was found on his easel after Davis's fatal stroke, offers more inscrutable evidence of his methods. On it, he marked out areas of the canvas with masking tape in a grid-like pattern. To what end, one wonders. Not to paint the straight edges of his shapes, for the tape doesn't coincide with them, and, in this case, the painting doesn't employ the hard edges Davis often used. More likely the tape functioned as a framing device, like the joined thumbs of a film director's hand, a means to establishing the composition. Ultimately, this incomplete work indicates, and illuminates, the substance, complexity, and mysterious operations of Davis's cheerful, simple paintings.

—Daniel Kunitz

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Music

New York chronicle

by Jay Nordlinger

The New York City Opera has been much discussed lately, and the discussion has centered on: Where should it be, and why should it be? City Opera has been thinking about cutting loose from Lincoln Center, its home for all these decades. Money is always a war there, and the place is sort of crumbling, physically. City Opera doesn't get along too well with its neighbors, including its (not always loving) big brother, the Metropolitan Opera. So, City Opera is thinking about a place all its own, perhaps downtown.

Whether it stays or bolts, the company has every reason to continue. Its virtues and benefits are many. First, a town like New York needs—could use—more than one major opera company. It could use about six. Second, tickets to the Met cost an arm and a leg, and tickets to City Opera cost only an arm and a foot or so. Third, the junior institution has always been known for showcasing younger singers—up 'n' comers—usually American. "See the stars of tomorrow today"—that sort of thing. And fourth, City Opera has always done us the favor of presenting out-of-the-way operas: not just new ones, but old ones. The company famously revived Handel's *Julius Caesar*, now one of the most beloved operas in the world (and produced at the Met, among other places). Last season, it offered Handel's *Acis and Galatea*. The season before that, it had put on *Platée*, by the French Baroque master Rameau. For that alone, all who care about music should wish for the good health and long life of City Opera.

In April, the company gave us Handel's *Agrippina*, one of that master's earliest efforts. When you've made *Julius Caesar* mainstream, you can dig even deeper into the vault. Who was this Agrippina? Nero's mother, a charmer who was rumored to have murdered her husband, the emperor Claudius, in order to put her son—by a different marriage, or liaison—on the throne. The opera is based very, very loosely on history, and it has an improbably happy ending, with all tied up in a bow. It does not contain many of Handel's "greatest hits": of the forty-five arias famously collected by Sergius Kagen and published by the International Music Company, only one is from *Agrippina*—the cheerful "Bel piacere." But the opera is Handel's after all, filled with invention and melody and the unhindered force of a historic talent.

The standout in City Opera's *Agrippina* was, perhaps appropriately, the soprano in the title role, Brenda Harris (an Illinoisian). She boasts both power and agility, which is a fearsome combination, in Handel not least. She executed neat, quick recitatives, and her singing was almost invariably accurate and assured. Her big scena in Act II—"Pensieri, voi mi tormentate"—was positively gripping. The other soprano in this show was Nancy Allen Lundy (a Minnesotan), in the role of Poppea. Her singing was usually pretty and apt, if not always

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characterful. When she tries to take on authority, she's liable to chirp—but she was perfectly adequate, or better than that, and she acted with charm.

On the stage were two countertenors, David Walker as Ottone and Ryland Angel as Narciso. It so happens that, at the same time, across the plaza at the Met, the King of the Countertenors—David Daniels—was starring as Lysander in Britten's *Midsummer Night's Dream*. (Of course, City Opera had much to do with the making of Daniels's career.) What is the world coming to, all these countertenors? Not so long ago, we had none, seemingly; now they're as common as water. In *Agrippina*, Walker had the more prominent role. He has rather little power, even for a countertenor, but he sang some lovely passages. He suffered, however, as the night wore on.

A singer with no shortage of power whatsoever is Gregory Reinhart, whose bass is almost startlingly huge—a little diffuse, but commanding. His enactment of Claudio (Claudius) contributed to the overall success of this production.

In the pit was the conductor Jane Glover, who, in addition to her baton duties, handled the harpsichord parts. Her conducting was always earnest and competent, but sometimes without a sparkle. There were stretches when the orchestra could have shown more life, could have been a little more insinuating, more imaginative, could have taken more evident pleasure in the proceedings. But, again, this was a solid effort.

Onstage, no participant took this production—wild and farcical—too seriously. Everything was done with a wink, and camp. Outright slapstick abounded. The sets were bizarre—nicely bizarre—combining the traditional with the modern, Roman grandeur and neon slickness and garishness: a little bit Mussolini, a little bit Studio 54. In all, this was a cracking show, from the king of the Baroque operatic theater, in a house that has served him well.

Serving the New York Philharmonic quite well is its principal guest conductor, Sir Colin Davis. At the end of this season, the Philharmonic's music director, Kurt Masur, will move on, but Davis is staying—and the orchestra could probably use the continuity.

This spring, Davis spent several weeks in New York, directing the orchestra in an all-Sibelius series and in a concert version of Mozart's opera *The Abduction from the Seraglio*. Davis is a Sibelius specialist, of course, and a Mozart specialist—also a Berlioz specialist and a Handel specialist. (If I may intrude a recordings opinion, I believe that Davis's account of *Messiah*, from 1966, with the London Symphony Orchestra and Chorus, and four sterling British soloists, is the finest—the most balanced, the most ceaselessly listenable—available.) But it's wrong to call Davis a "specialist," in anything: he is a complete conductor, at home in music at large, as all top-flight maestros must be.

He began his Sibelius concert with a little-known tone poem, *Pohjola's Daughter*, a work that tells a story, and that is unmistakably Sibelius-like: we hear the ice, the bleakness, the mystery, the romance. How can this be? It's a matter of color, phrasing, temperament, and everything else in the musician's bag of tricks. Davis led this work with elegance and understanding. The dynamic range was exceptionally wide, with softer-than-soft softs—but that could be heard—and very loud louds, that did not blare or push. An astounding legato settled over the orchestra, broken only by the folkish beauty of some of the solo parts. There was also terrific drama in Davis's conducting: this is no cool, decorous Englishman (unless, naturally, that is required of him).

Afterward came Sibelius's Humoresques for violin, all six of them. The soloist was the Philharmonic's concertmaster, Glenn Dicterow, a clear local favorite, from the ovation he always receives. The Humoresques are sprightly, gay, and, indeed, humorous. We normally don't think of Sibelius as a lot of laughs, but these violinistic ditties prove otherwise. Each piece has a character; we find a touch of Vienna, a touch of Prague. The Humor-

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esques are somewhat light for a symphonic concert, but they deserve to be heard. Whether they should be heard all together—in a group of six—is another matter. They were written separately, as occasional pieces, it seems, and Sibelius himself might regard the presentation of all six of them as a bit much—like an overload of meringue.

Dicterow did his work competently, if not with overwhelming lyricism and charm.

The Big Symphony on the program was the Fifth, which is something of—to violate my own rule—a Davis specialty (as proven by his recordings of the work). He did not try to do too much with the piece too soon; he allowed it to idle, before really revving up, when he needed the speed. The way he built the first movement to its elegantly thunderous, timpani-fueled ending was thrilling. The third and final movement tingled, and yearned, and delighted. There was a technical breakdown in the violin section, but it was of little importance. Also, Davis—unusually for him, because he is not an interpretive eccentric—took tremendously odd, super-long, and weirdly spaced pauses among the several final chords. And yet nothing could have spoiled this performance, one of the most satisfying of the Philharmonic's season.

Speaking of satisfying, we must discuss Krystian Zimerman, the Polish pianist: he is known as one of the great Romantics, a player of unabashed passion, someone who lets it all hang out, regardless. In some respects, he is a kindred spirit of Leonard Bernstein, and it's not surprising that they got along so well. They did several recordings together, including a famous and controversial one of Brahms's Second Concerto, so lush and ardent and purple as to be almost unbelievable, almost offensive: but fascinating all the same.

Zimerman visited Carnegie Hall for an all-Brahms recital. The program was interestingly organized: the group of small pieces constituting op. 118—miniature masterpieces, composed by the fully mature Brahms—and the second and third sonatas, youthful, sprawling, and untamed. The smaller pieces, Zimerman played with memorable distinction. He did just about everything right. His pedaling was exemplary—very important in these works. Also (and relatedly), you could always hear the melodic line, amid the general lushness. Zimerman's prodigious technique serves him even in these miniatures: for example, he doesn't have to struggle in the reaches, preserving the ease and arc of the music.

The pianist has a reputation—not undeserved, of course—for exaggeration, and yet he showed the most beautiful taste and restraint in Op. 118. The Intermezzo in A major was a little Brahms song, full of longing, and simple. The rhapsodic Ballade in G minor was big, edging toward the bombastic—but it stayed within bounds, properly exciting. The Romance in F major had great nobility, without undue pathos—and Zimerman sighed his way through the D-major section exquisitely. The Intermezzo in E-flat minor, which closes the set, is very hard to judge. It is kind of a fantasia, mapped in its own world. But Zimerman found his way to—may I say—perfection.

Honestly, this was some of the most refined Brahms playing I can remember hearing; that it was unexpected—by me—made it all the more gratifying. If the pianist can be faulted on anything, it is that sometimes the notes he struck were not sustained, as they should have been: he would strike, and yet the sound would die, not singing on. But there we enter the realm of cavil.

The composer's Sonata No. 2 in F-sharp minor is, sad to say, not great Brahms, or even good Brahms: but he did not burn it (as he did many of his other creations). Zimerman, whatever the case, is the man to play it: he is—to pick two publicist's and reviewer's clichés—both a "poet of the piano" and a "blazing virtuoso," a combination not falling off trees. One quality that marks Zimerman's playing is freedom. He is obviously an erudite man, but he never smothers anything in intellection. The last movement of the sonata, he infused with a stirring peasant vitality.

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In the Third—and superior—Sonata, the F minor, Zimerman was duly heaven-storming, but unfailingly elegant. These were thunderbolts wrapped in velvet. His treatment was symphonic, and yet he did no banging. The famous Andante espressivo was clear and tender; the Finale was magisterial. One may question whether it's desirable to hear this much Brahms in a single recital, rather than a more balanced feast—but if Zimerman plays the composer this way, who can blame him? In both affinity and ability, he's beyond question.

As if that recital weren't good enough: Christine Schäfer, the German soprano, appeared in Lincoln Center's Alice Tully Hall, for some lieder and a distinguished American work. She was fresh from starring as Lulu at the Metropolitan Opera (in the Berg opera of the same name). This might be said to be her signature role, in opera. She is most prized, however, for her recitals, to which lieder aficionados in particular flock. Schäfer studied with Arleen Auger and Dietrich Fischer-Dieskau, among others. That is a pedigree to heighten expectations.

The soprano began the afternoon with some lesser-known songs of Schubert, including the three "Ellen" songs, set to Sir Walter Scott (*The Lady of the Lake*). Beauty of sound is not the point of Schäfer, although she has a perfectly serviceable voice: it is precise and focused. She is a pure and unaffected singer, much like the late Auger. She favors direct, intimate communication, not going in for any preciousness. And she always holds your attention. This may seem a silly thing to say: who doesn't, and isn't that the responsibility of the listener? Not really. A lieder singer who can hold the listener's attention, all through, is a rare breed of artist.

There is one Ellen song, I should have said, that is hardly unfamiliar: "Ave Maria!" (exclamation point in the original). It is, in fact, almost grotesquely familiar, and it was somewhat daring of Schäfer to do it. It is well she did, however, because she gave that chestnut authority, simplicity, and newness, all at once. Not for a measure was it monotonous or tired. Schäfer worked subtle rallentandos and other tempo variations, and she altered her dynamics shrewdly—all without any distortions. It was amazing to discover that "Ave Maria!" could be so effective—and affecting—at this late date. This did not seem the song sung at your niece's wedding.

Schäfer's American work was George Crumb's shimmering, exotic, impressionistic *Apparition* (to texts of Walt Whitman). On this music, Schäfer can bring all her formidable skills to bear: delicacy, deftness, sensuousness, slinkiness, superb technical control. She executed bird sounds that were much like vocalizing (singing practice): we heard owls and whippoorwills, and a smidgeon of coloratura. Unusual intervals posed no problem for Schäfer, for anyone who can sing Lulu accurately can sing Crumb. Her *pianissimos* were spell-binding, and her singing generally had the entire hall in a trance. *Apparition* and Schäfer were made for each other, and she should get this work on CD, soon.

After intermission, we had the Schumann song-cycle *Dichterliebe* (which the American soprano Barbara Bonney had sung in Carnegie Hall some weeks before). At this point, Schäfer was sounding a bit ragged, a bit worn, but her ability to think her way through the cycle was untouched. She exhibited fragility, fear, sorrow, rage, doubt, defiance, and everything else that the composer—and the poet, Heine—require. Her accompanist, Ted Taylor, is far from a polished pianist, but he is an astute "collaborative artist" (to use the modern jargon), which is what is demanded. In the song "Hör ich das Liedchen klingen," Schäfer did an amazing thing: she demonstrated *sustained* fragility, a fragility that is well and truly fragile but that does not break down, vocally. Tricky, and rare.

Many people think that Christine Schäfer—still young and fresh—has already established herself as a great singer. They are not wrong.

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The media

Irrevocable vulgarization

by James Bowman

They have started appearing on the streets of Washington, the gaily painted, smaller-than-life-sized effigies of elephants and donkeys collectively known as "Party Animals" that are the latest incarnations of the kind of public art pioneered by Chicago's cows three years ago. Actually, Zürich first came up with the idea (if it is not to dignify such a gesture to call it an idea) but, as in so many other cases, Americans have taken the lead in marketing a European concept. Since then, for instance, there have been pigs in Cincinnati and Seattle, horses in Lexington, Kentucky, buffalo in Buffalo, moose in Toronto, and stylized beagles—or "Snoopies"—in St. Paul, which is the birthplace of Charles Schultz, creator of the cartoon strip "Peanuts"—to name just a few examples of that good old American can-do spirit.

But while such kitsch was merely annoying in the City of Big Shoulders and elsewhere, there is something epoch-making about its arrival in the seat of government. One senses a sort of quasi-official benediction being pronounced upon the more general Disney-fication of the culture, a final assimilation of public discourse to mere boosterism and glad-handing. Washington's first "Party Animals" were unveiled by the First Lady, Laura Bush, and Mayor Anthony Williams. As Jacqueline Trescott wrote in *The Washington Post*, "When they lifted off the bright red covering, they both burst into laughter. And that's the point: to show Washington's secret whimsical side, to showcase its artists and to give residents and tourists the same kind of diversion that 'Cows on Parade' provided Chicago."

Actually, Washington's "whimsical side" can hardly be said to be much of a secret these days, as some of us thought recently when (according to the *Wall Street Journal*'s "Washington Wire" column) the House appropriations committee adjourned for three hours so that its members could attend the expert testimony being given elsewhere in the capitol by the film actress Julia Roberts on behalf of government funding for research on Rett Syndrome. But it is now almost the case that this studied "whimsical" quality of buildings or artifacts—say, iconic animals dressed to attract tourists by looking like a more outlandish sort of tourist themselves—is seen as one of the hallmarks of "art." Another is that, in addition to an apparently endless supply of "artists" prepared to play this game, there is the opportunity for collaborative contributions by schoolchildren, cancer patients, multiethnic encounter groups, and the like.

Of course it is true that, as was observed by Anthony Gittens, executive director of the D.C. Commission on the Arts and Humanities, which organized the project, "Sometimes we in Washington tend to take ourselves a bit too seriously. . . . 'Party Animals' is an opportunity to lighten up and poke a little fun at ourselves." But you can't help thinking that this is a man who is fundamentally uninterested in politics, or

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else he would know with what regularity politicians already make themselves into figures of fun—precisely by taking themselves not a bit but a lot too seriously. Still, the witty and colorful animal figures are said to be good for tourism and "community spirit." As the mayor put it, "Art is also important because it is about the spirit of our city, the spirit of us as people, the spirit of us as Washingtonians and, yes, the spirit of us as Americans."

Quite what "spirit" is betokened by a herd of brightly-colored fiberglass animals is unclear, but it hardly seems to bode well for the future of the Republic, does it? The sad thing is that hizzoner is probably right. One way to look at the "Party Animals" is as an ironic tribute to David Riesman, who died in May and whose bestseller of the 1950s, *The Lonely Crowd*, did so much to give rise to Americans' (especially young Americans') "whimsical" side a decade later. Only then, of course, whimsicality seemed to promise an escape from the need to conform to old-fashioned and adult norms. Nowadays it has itself become a way of conforming to that spirit of dreary jollity—or ludic transgression, if you prefer—which has been enforced upon us by the combined efforts of the arts, the entertainment, and the diversity industries.

Although the indignity of having the First Lady preside at the unveiling of "Party Animals" is not of the same order of magnitude as those indignities which were visited upon her predecessor, Washington's plunge into the popular culture during the Clinton years looks to be more and more irreversible. Could it have been mere coincidence, for example, that during the same week as those cute elephants and donkeys began to appear it was revealed that Bill Clinton was negotiating for his own, Oprah-like TV talk-show? The *Los Angeles Times* reported that Clinton had demanded $50 million from NBC for a talk-show deal, which doesn't seem unreasonable when you consider that Oprah makes $300 million a year for CBS—and that she is giving up her show (she says) in four years' time.

Though Clinton later denied that there were "now" any plans for such a show, or that if there were it would adopt the Oprah format, it seems to me impossible to deny that, if he were not already a TV star of sorts (wasn't he in "That Nineties Show" on Fox?) he would not be making $250,000 per speech, or up to $15 million a year, or have a $12 million book deal with Knopf. Such are the perks of being a bona fide celebrity, and adding a talk-show to the properties controlled by Clinton Enterprises, Inc., would hardly represent a major diversification of the core business. And how could it be otherwise? Though it is easy to sneer about Bill's Big Bucks, I can't myself lay my hand on my heart and say that, in his position (always assuming that I might ever find myself in his position) I would spurn from me all such attempts to fill my lap with gold. Although it is hard not to agree with the Nigerian woman who said of Clinton on CNN's "Talk Back Live" that "he is the former president of the Free World. It is very demeaning for him to want to do this," it is also hard to plow a lone furrow, to stand out against the tendency of the times, without anything in particular to stand *for*. At any rate it is impossible to imagine Clinton doing it.

For, just as it had presumably already become conceivable—as it was not, for instance, in the day of Dwight Eisenhower—to ask a question of the President of the United States about his preference in underpants on national television at some point before Clinton so blithely answered it, so the national willingness to treat the former president as a slightly raffish celebrity making millions from personal appearances can hardly be added to the already brimming charge sheet of the former president. He was never the man to stand on his dignity, even back in the days when it was supposed that he had any. Dignity is in any case incompatible with the "whimsical" spirit of America, and with the kind of bogus "sincerity" and personal authenticity demanded of politicians in a celebrity culture like ours. It will be interesting to see

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how long our present president is able to hold on to what remains of his own.

If there is a culprit in this sad tale of irrevocable vulgarization, it is the journalistic thirst for just this kind of factitious authenticity. What was not often recognized back in March when the media world was rocked by the news that ABC was considering dumping Ted Koppel and "Nightline" in favor of David Letterman, who was thought to have been on the point of being poached from CBS, was the extent to which Koppel and Letterman were really in the same business. Both try to put "the human side" of celebrities on display for audiences that demand to see this side of them as the price of their celebrity-worship. Koppel's celebrities tend to be more political while Letterman's are mostly showbiz folk, but occasionally each is prepared to trespasses on the other's territory. True, as Howard Kurtz wrote in *The Washington Post*, Koppel is "more interested in Yasser Arafat than Ozzy Osbourne and doesn't care who knows it," but it is not exactly self-evident that more enlightenment is to be expected from the one than the other.

In fact, I would expect more of genuine informative import to come out of Dave's encounter with Ozzy—who, for those not familiar with him, was the lead singer of a defunct pop group and who now has a top-rated "reality"-type show on MTV in which he pretends to be a pop star pretending to be a family man—than Ted's with Yasser. Both derive whatever interest they possess from the celebrity encounter, which is designed to certify the celebrities' human side with a bit of emotion or an anecdote of private life, but the content of Arafat's message is bound to be something that could have been scripted for him by ABC News (or anybody else), while Osbourne seems quite likely to say something unexpected. Certainly he is more whimsical.

Not that Ted himself is incapable of whimsy. Some years ago he appeared on the Letterman show in the guise of a roller-blader—what a wild and crazy guy!—which may have had something to do with Letterman's much publicized reluctance to be the cause of his being thrust from his late-night perch. Anyway, when you consider that, although they attract audiences of a similar size, the demographic profile of Letterman's is younger and so more attractive to advertisers (which is why ABC wanted him), it becomes possible to speculate that, in a few years' time, Letterman will *be* Koppel. Already it is clear that they come from the same, "media," world. Just consider this paragraph from David Margolick's account of the contretemps, rushed into print for the June number of *Vanity Fair*, for which he followed Koppel to a town meeting in Queens:

> Koppel is now 62 years old. Unusual in his world, he has let himself grow leathery and lined. Despite his devotion to the news, even his ABC News peers sometimes find him self-righteous, uncollegial, preachy. But when he was sitting on the stage in Queens that night, the familiar back of his famous head before me, Koppel displayed everything that has made him a television institution and, increasingly, an anachronism: his intelligence, his elegance, his empathy, his reasonableness, his patience, his wit. With the wounded and indignant and intemperate of September 11, he was simultaneously scintillating and soothing. Just as striking was everything he has never been and refuses to become, as so many in television "news" now are: belligerent, inarticulate, plastic, primitive.

There it is: yet another dispatch from the celebrity hunt—this time with the hunter as the quarry—with the breathless news that some TV or movie or political icon is *authentically human*. Like ourselves in fact. If proof of the fact is all that we demand of them, we demand it frequently and insatiably. Admittedly, this is *Vanity Fair*, but such coverage was hardly untypical of the mainstream press at the time, when authenticity was conferred by the supposed high drama of the clash of media titans. "At ABC, A Shaken News Dynasty" Howard Kurtz

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headlined portentously in *The Washington Post*.

> In just six days, one of television's most respected news divisions has been plunged into disarray. Since word leaked that executives at Disney-owned ABC were courting the CBS late-night comic for Koppel's time slot, an impassioned debate has erupted over whether even the highest-quality broadcast news can compete against popular entertainment that delivers larger and younger audiences to advertisers.

Impassioned debate? If so, it is passion like that of the *Rape of the Lock*, and cries out for another Pope to do it justice. As in the case of Belinda and her lock, the funniest thing about the whole funny business is that those who were at the center of it didn't see it as funny. Referring to the much quoted remark by an anonymous ABC executive that Koppel's show was no longer "relevant" because of the acres of instant analysis available on the Internet, Kurtz quoted yet another anonymous executive as saying that "People would have understood the economic argument. . . . The hurtful part of it is being told you're not relevant anymore."

There speaks modern management technique. Above all, no one must be subjected to anything "hurtful"—though of course being hurt is also the best way to demonstrate personal authenticity. But the question of whether or not Mr. Koppel's show objectively is or is not "relevant" is secondary, at best, to that of whether or not he has been treated with the sort of respect owed to one of the great panjandrums of the journalistic "profession." That was Koppel's own point in the thunderous counterblast he penned in the form of an op-ed piece for *The New York Times*, in which he wrote with a sense of self-importance worthy of the *Times* itself that "it is, at best, inappropriate and, at worst, malicious to describe what my colleagues and I are doing as lacking relevance."

Naturally, all worshippers at the shrine of journalistic professionalism agreed with him. "What's left of broadcast television journalism is at stake now, many in the business believe," wrote Tom Rosenstiel and Bill Kovach in the *Post*. Oh yes? And remind me why we should care? Do Rosenstiel and Kovach really suppose that the slender skein of seriousness—tending because of its very exiguousness to shade into the pompous and self-important—represented by Mr. Koppel's TV show is enough to redeem for "journalism" the vast sea of vulgarity and triviality otherwise represented by the networks? They go on to insist that

> [W]hat Disney executives are really arguing is that journalism is just another kind of content; that communication is communication. In other words, if people can watch Larry King at 9, or Chris Matthews's "Hardball," or the "O'Reilly Factor" on Fox, Ted Koppel becomes irrelevant.
>
> But what most people understand post-9/11, which Disney does not, is that when television journalism increasingly becomes defined by talk shows, celebrity and consumer segments and soap-operatic episodes on, say, "Dateline," a show such as "Nightline" actually becomes more relevant—because it is so rare. Inside television, "Nightline" is now an island.

Caryn James in *The New York Times* made a somewhat similar argument for the relevance of network news in general—on the grounds, that is, that the rare bits of seriousness appearing on or among the news shows constitute a sort of *cordon sanitaire* to protect the rest of their news broadcasts from unseemly juxtapositions.

> Soon after midnight on Friday, when the news broke that Israeli tanks were surrounding Yasir Arafat's compound, CNN cut into its regular program. It was a replay of that night's "Larry King Live" with guests from the television version of "Ripley's Believe It or Not." Mr. King talked to a woman who survived a car crash and now has 200 metal plates in her head.
>
> That juxtaposition of the ludicrous and the

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> earth-shattering represents the plausible future. When dealing with hard news, networks and cable both do a solid, remarkably similar job. (Well, except for the conservative Fox News Channel, where one of its anchors, Diane Dimond, has referred to members of the United States military as "our guys" and the opinionated Geraldo Rivera is playing reporter.)
>
> The significant gap is not between networks and cable, but between real news and the newslike substance that surrounds it, filler that is the equivalent of a cheese-food product vaguely resembling the real thing. On Monday Mr. King interviewed Madeleine Albright, then chatted with Judge Judy. Next to such a whiplash-inducing lineup, naturally the network news programs look good. In a half-hour minus commercials, there's no time for the weirdos and the shouting confrontations that pass for news on cable.

She concludes that "What the network anchors add is a sense of authority that translates to something more than style." What it is that is more than style she never gets round to telling us, though her mention later on of the anchormen's "symbolic importance" suggests that what she has in mind is a sort of reassurance to their audience that the gravity of the news has been answered by the *gravitas* of the newsmen: don't worry about the Middle East situation's getting out of control, folks. We have a crack team of reporters on the scene.

I wonder if there is not also some connection between this bizarre belief in the importance of journalists and the sneer directed at Diane Dimond for referring to American troops as "our guys." The godlike figure of the network news anchor bestrides the petty squabbles of lesser men like a colossus and cannot be seen to take sides. Or, to put it another way, all emotions are welcomed to tabloid-TV save the patriotic. It's true that Dan Rather cried on David Letterman's show, but that was from compassion for the victims of September 11. His subsequent expression of a patriotic willingness to be called to the colors was thought by many to be in rather poor taste. Such are the lengths to which the superstition of journalistic "objectivity" is pursued that, when Gregg Zoroya, a reporter for *USA Today*, interviewed a Palestinian woman about her planned suicide bombing and subsequently refused to divulge her name to Israeli security forces, hardly anyone noticed, except for Scott Shuger in *Slate* and Howard Kurtz in *The Washington Post*—and no one made a fuss about it.

Ms. James's article, referred to above, went on to make the obligatory tour of the cable channels' inanities, including the new "Crossfire" on CNN, which she compares to Fox's "Celebrity Boxing." I wonder that these critics don't get tired of their endless laments for the convergence of news and entertainment. It's not exactly news—in more ways than one—that cable talk shows are deliberately provoked shouting matches, or that there is a high proportion of lightweight or gossipy stories on their news broadcasts (the networks have a lot of fluff too, she admits, "but their fluff is healthier"). For myself, I say so much the better if news is entertainment. So long as we recognize the fact, we are more likely to put things in their proper perspective and not confuse TV newsreaders and interviewers with genuinely important people—except, of course, for their shared sense of whimsy.

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Verse chronicle

Falls the shadow

by William Logan

A Short History of the Shadow[1] is a pendant to Charles Wright's *Appalachian Book of the Dead*, the three trilogies that took him a quarter-century to complete. The new poems are written in the sketchy, hither-thither manner, like the musings of a man waking from anaesthesia, into which Wright's hard early style has gradually softened. He has enough irony left to realize how close that style has grown (except in ambition) to the junk pile of Pound's *Cantos*. You could almost rewrite Wright's diaries, if you'd been careless enough to use them for kindling, from the daybook entries here.

Wright's specialty is romantic vision (you suspect he'd see himself as a visionary, if he weren't so modest and afflicted with doubt) —he finds the sublime in the unlikeliest places, and at his best makes you think such places are exactly where to look. Much of the time he writes of his back yard or the room where he sits, which shows a telling humility as well as paralyzing laziness—a writer who can't be bothered to stir from his chair is soon writing odes to his desk lamp. When Wright describes the "Orange Crush sunset over the Blue Ridge" or "Cold like a shot of Novocain/ under the week's gums," the images thrust pastoral into the modern world. You think of Homer's wine-dark sea, or Dante comparing Geryon's skin to Tartar cloth—the familiar objects tame the foreign, even in Hell, and the domestic is afterwards left a little unfamiliar. (When Wright spies a "handful of Alzheimered apple trees," however, you're sorry Dr. Alzheimer ever discovered a disease.)

> Twilight twisting down like a slow screw
> Into the balsa wood of Saturday afternoon,
> Late Saturday afternoon,
> a solitary plane
> Eating its way like a moth across the bolt of
> dusk
> Hung like cheesecloth above us.

Wright has long been a poet of gorgeous description, so I feel churlish pointing out that twilight rises from the ground and that moth larvae, not moths, eat fabric. Homer or Dante would have bothered to get these things right. Too many of these poems sink into the portentous tone that passes for wisdom in contemporary poetry. Wright is quick to invoke the "abyss," to summon the "other world"—he settles for a beachcomber's philosophizing with a swig of metaphysical sentiment. There's more poeticizing than poetry here, as in the trilogies that preceded it, which are no more a long poem than Wright's dimestore metaphysics (when a poem's going badly, a few angels get thrown in) is real metaphysics.

> Our world is of little moment, of course, but
> it *is* our world.
> Thus it behooves us to contemplate,

1 *A Short History of the Shadow*, by Charles Wright; Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 81 pages, $20.

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from time to time,
The *weight of glory* we should wish reset in
our hearts,
About the things which are seen,
and things which are not seen,
That corresponds like to like,
The stone to the dark of the earth, the flame
to the star.

Behooves us! *The weight of glory*! Robert Lowell in his madness believed he was Milton. Wright in his sanity is willing to settle for Henry Ward Beecher.

These gentlemanly Southern poems lie drowsily on the page, as if the poet had handed you a mint julep and invited you into a hammock. When a poet admits he's "getting too old and lazy to write poems," the prognosis isn't good. Any reader who wants to take Wright seriously, who wants to revel in the naked beauty of descriptions that rival even Pound's (when people say they love parts of *The Cantos,* what they love are the landscapes), must put up with more eternities and immensities and everlastings than you could shake a stick at. Wright likes to drop the names of poets with imaginations morally more serious than his own (Vallejo, Machado, Mandelstam, Lorca, Alberti, Rimbaud)—this seems a quiet form of self-mortification. All he can offer in return are lines like "We yo-yo the Absolute big-time," which may be the worst metaphysical line ever written.

Wright is one of our most talented poets; but he's content to make bad jokes ("We come, we hang out, we disappear"—just what Caesar would have said, if he'd thought of it), to use *poise* and *neon* and *glacier* and *Crayola* as verbs (and *insected* as an adjective). Art is often in the flaws, in the sullen differences that allow a writer to evade the poetry of the age. (Sometimes what at first annoys us in a poet is just what we later appreciate.) But however much I want to believe that Wright's carelessness and over-reaching might be crucial to his casual beauty, too many of these poems skim the surface of the poet's impressions the way a cook skims fat.

All the world loves a misanthrope. The grumpy codger is a stock dramatic figure, perfect for undercutting our romantic illusions—even if the lack of illusion is another illusion. A misanthrope expresses the ugly thoughts beneath our sweet natures: the chill of envy, the glaring rage, the Scrooge-like meanness. He (misanthropes are usually male) allows us to gratify our worst instincts and then congratulate ourselves for despising them.

Alan Dugan's poems are essentially Hobbesian—nasty, brutish, and short. (He even titles his books like an ascetic. I'm sure readers who bought *Poems* forty years ago had no idea it would be followed by *Poems Two* through *Six*, and now *Poems Seven*,[2] which collects his previous work and adds new poems as well.) His first book was a selection in the Yale Series of Younger Poets and won both the National Book Award and the Pulitzer Prize. His taste for sour (and vituperative) complaint and bare-knuckled self-analysis became characteristic, though many poems were cast in a monstrous diction half Dylan Thomas, half Hart Crane:

Fallen in salt-sweat, piercing skin, the bones
essay plantation in their dirt of home

and rest their aching portion in the heat's
blood afternoon. O if the sun's day-laborer
records inheritable yield, the script
is morning's alpha to omega after dark:
the figured head to scrotum of the bull.

Such doughy, overwrought pentameter (with feet added here and there, like a home improvement project gone wrong) is in a different world from the plain style Dugan made his own: "The river brought down/ dead horses, dead men/ and military debris,/ indicative of war/ or official acts upstream,/ but it went by, it all/ goes by, that is the thing/ about the river."

The classical references that larded those early poems might have seemed just period

2 *Poems Seven: New and Complete Poetry*, by Alan Dugan; Seven Stories Press, 422 pages, $35.

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flotsam (classical gods propped up so much fifties verse the publishers of Bulfinch must have rivaled Croesus); but Dugan took the old gods seriously, as if the proper Cold War stance was that of a Roman in Caesar's Rome—he wanted to be a Catullus with a chip on his shoulder. A generation ago, Roman poets were still bowdlerized in school texts (they may be bowdlerized now, in those small pockets of resistance where students learn Latin). Dugan invented himself as a foul-mouthed, evil-tempered loner, a man who had seen the horrors and longed to report them:

> He turned his father's small inheritance over
> and over
> on hemorrhoid ads between three-hour
> lunches
> at the Plaza every day and cocktails at five-
> thirty
> with different dressy women waiting in
> our front office.
> We joked that he fucked them up the ass to
> make more customers
> and were nauseated by him because he
> picked his ears
> with the lead end of his lead pencil.

Dugan is scathing about the pointlessness of work ("for wages, some shit's profits, and his own/ payment on his dreamed family plan"), the degradations of love, the ghastly human condition (where the first imperative is *Eat!* and the second, *Screw!*); but this hard-boiled austerity, this isolation from the causes of joy (Catullus knew pleasures, but for Dugan pleasure is just the crass satisfaction of instinct), left him no room to develop. The poems have ground on, decade by decade, in cruel repetition, like a bread and water ration. They explore a realm that would make most poets flinch (there's an elegy that mixes necrophilia and incest), but far too many are gloomy and glib affairs—it's not enough to be naked in a poem if all you offer is your nakedness.

Very little lyric poetry, and almost all satire, is founded on a belief that men and women are weak, corrupted, foolish things (satire is a form of forgiveness, too). Nihilism is too rare in contemporary poetry, where sentiments are sold on the sidewalk. The shiver we feel in reading Dugan comes from knowing we've entertained such mordant thoughts and rejected them to think better of ourselves. A misanthrope no longer needs to think better of himself. In "Love Song: I and Thou," "How We Heard the Name," "Portrait from the Infantry," "Barefoot for a Scorpion," "Untitled Poem" ("I've promised that I will not care"), "The Decimation before Phraäta," "Portrait of a Local Politician," and half a dozen others, Dugan has seen the world with rueful despair and no prejudices but his own.

But is that enough? Without Larkin's appreciation of foible or Hecht's taste for darkly beautiful lines, Dugan's poetry has been cruelly limited: his world reduces everyone to Freudian complex and Marxist statistic, where poetry is written for "love, publicity and money." There's a thrill hearing what we're not supposed to say, but misery hearing it over and over again—Diogenes in his tub must have been a terrible old bore.

Cynthia Zarin's delicate, whimsical poems are knowing in a disquieting way—as if she doesn't quite *want* to know what she knows (the dust jacket claims *The Watercourse*[3] was written after a divorce, though you can scarcely tell from the poems). She has learned much from Marianne Moore and Elizabeth Bishop and Amy Clampitt, and when you read her poems you often think you're reading Moore or Bishop or Clampitt.

> The rationing, the slugs on the lawn, the spirit
> lamp casting up the mute face of
> the charwoman's dead child, the elephantine
> car that made it through another
>
> winter, the hoarfrost dotting the lawn. An
> utter

3 *The Watercourse*, by Cynthia Zarin; Alfred A. Knopf, 79 pages, $23.

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frenzy of communication, of agendas
surprisingly fulfilled in the glossy umber
evenings with—downstairs—the wireless

going, each typed letter (for later, she typed
them) a stitch in the seam every so
often righted by an exclamation, a scrawled
postscript.

Such stanzas are lovely, but you'd swear they were torn from Clampitt's notebook (ventriloquism can be forgiven in a young poet—in an older it looks like ill-breeding). When a mop resembles "an octopus that sat on top of its pole/ like a fright wig," you think, *Oh, Marianne Moore!*, and when a group of children, each smaller than the last, looks "like notes on a xylophone," you think, *Why, Elizabeth Bishop!*

If Zarin were just the sum of her IOUs, she'd be no more interesting than a talking parrot; yet the longer you read the more her voice emerges from its influences. Some of the poems don't come to much (that's the risk of writing poems so modest and self-effacing—some efface themselves entirely), but the best have a bruised delicacy and wounded charm, touched by the graces, and disgrace, of minor things. She writes about a Spode plate:

I thought if you scrubbed, the stain would
dissolve in
the water used to douse it, and the scene—the
burning

tree with its too-heavy bright bloom, the black
stars
on the charred hill, the ragged maiden—
would again

be a place that had heard nothing, and seen
less,
a landscape of mild temperance, the smooth
porcelain

alive with the sheen of reflected moonlight,
where Orion
could shoot the bear along the river, and miss,
and miss.

Very little reality muscles into these poems, but don't we read poetry because it's more intelligent or seductive than the real? We can always look up from a book; how rarely, when we look down from the window, do we see a poem. An imagined world, a truly imagined world, is something we could not have seen for ourselves, no matter how hard we looked.

Auden once suggested that poets were dominated by Ariel (beauty) or Prospero (truth), but a darker and more brutal division might be between Ariel (intelligence) and Caliban (emotion). Ariel has no emotions, *The Tempest* makes plain, but Caliban is in thrall to them. Zarin is an Ariel—like Auden and Merrill, Clampitt and Bishop and Moore, she has gauzy charms rather than grim passions, and loves to seem frivolous even when serious. Stevens was an Ariel poet, but Eliot was a Caliban (even in his light verse). Pound was a Caliban, and so was Frost, who in his snowbound Yankee December dreamed he was an Ariel and sometimes wrote Ariel poems, sappy as a Vermont maple in floodtime. Lowell was a Caliban, too—Calibans brood, while Ariels are incapable of brooding. They'd rather get on with seeing things (Calibans feel before they see, Ariels see before they feel). Calibans prefer the prison or the cave, keeping Plato company, while Ariels are happiest in gardens or mock Edens, writing about birds and moths, or on a bad day about angels. If Ariels live for transformation, Calibans sit staring at the sutures and scars of identity.

Some of Zarin's poems are slight as nursery rhymes (though written by macaws or mandrills), and she even has a funny and touching ode to her typewriter. A reader tired of poems that noisily proclaim their importance (seemingly humble poets can be noisiest of all) may find solace—and gay, self-mocking intelligence—in the poems here. Sometimes a quiet voice, expecially one so confident in its lack of confidence, is more lasting than the loud voices trying to drown it out.

Dick Davis was part of a group of proper

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English formal poets, ardent admirers of Yvor Winters, that made almost no impact on British poetry in the seventies and eighties. Like many New Formalists in America, their verse was a little too careful, a little too ordinary, and a little too dull. Sometimes as formal poets age they unbend (all too often they become fossilized instead) and use their trained ears to write in classical simplicity.

> The sun comes up, and soon
> The night's thin fall of snow
> Fades from the grass as if
> It could not wait to go.
>
> But look, a lank line lingers
> Beyond the lawn's one tree,
> Safe in its shadow still,
> Held momentarily.

The first stanza might have been written by Frost, it's so cleanly expressive; but the second must have been by Frost's deaf yardman, with its clogged alliteration and the awkward rhyme on a secondary accent. It's amusing to find an exponent of the classical virtues guilty, elsewhere, of a dangling participle as bad as some freshman's ("Lifting her arms to soap her hair/ Her pretty breasts respond").

The poems in *Belonging*[4] have the soulless and manufactured air of kitchen appliances (they're like a refrigerator talking to a microwave). They don't have room for the personality of craft and their meter comes from a handbook, the righteous handbook of Winters. (In a good poet the meter is rarely confining—it seems liberating instead.) The poems are so professional and suburban, they don't allow anything to ruffle their complacencies—if they were married they'd be monogamous, and dues-paying members of the Kiwanis Club. You long for a little rowdiness to trouble their surfaces, but all you get is a watered-down cocktail of Frost and Richard Wilbur.

Wilbur is a hero to young formal poets and has been generous praising them, but he was a more baroque and metaphysical and intellectual poet than poets now dare to be—too many laws (the kind poets unconsciously observe, the laws of taste) have been passed against such elaboration and decoration. Wilbur was a Bernini once, who could say things in meter that free verse would never allow (Davis is stuck saying the things free verse rejects). It would be stimulating to have a few Berninis again.

At times you suspect Davis is a closet skeptic, but you'd have to threaten his family to get him to admit it. He pursues his craft in a dogged way, writing monotonous monorhymes, or lines regular as a metronome and twice as determined ("A child let loose on Nelson's *Victory*/ I fantasized his last quixotic quest,/ Trafalgar's carnage—where he coolly dressed/ As gaudily as if he wished to be . . . "), or passages like Kipling in a malarial fit:

> And the sudden breeze of sunrise, like a
> nervous lover's hands
> Hardly touching, but still touching, as my
> body understands,
> Like a whisper that insists on life's importunate
> demands
>
> Tugging me to love and pleasure, to what
> passes as we sleep,
> To the roses' quick unfolding, to the moments
> that won't keep,
> To the ruin of a childhood, and the tears that
> parents weep.

Such sentiments are best left to the experts, the greeting-card writers.

Amid the humdrum and predictable verse, however, are a few epigrams as astringent as anything by J. V. Cunningham.

> The pretty young bring to the coarsely old
> Réchauffé dishes, but the sauce is cold.

That has a pleasantly bitter taste; but the next, on teaching poetry workshops, is even better:

4 *Belonging*, by Dick Davis; Swallow Press/Ohio University Press, 54 pages, $24.95; $14.95 (paper).

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A house was rented for the visitor
Who came to lecture here for one spring
quarter:
In house and class his only duties were
To feed the hummingbirds with sugared
water.

Those lines have a delayed sting and you have to be patient enough to wait for it. A poet who can write epigrams shimmering with such wit, ragged with such despair, has no business writing anything else. Cunningham, a Wintersian himself, gave most of his last forty years to epigrams and wrote half a dozen that are among the delights of the last century. Davis could do worse with his next few decades.

Reading Jorie Graham's poems in *Never*[5] is like watching a slow-motion nature documentary where an anaconda ever so lazily disarticulates its jaw and inch by inch, millimeter by millimeter, swallows a goat. Such microscopic infatuation with detail is entrancing, the world slowed to the creeping choreography of muscle; but it can be blindingly tedious.

The under-shadowed paisleys scripting wave-
edge down-
slope
on the barest inclination, sun making of each
milelong wave-retreat
a golden translucent forward downgoing,
golden sentences writ on clearest moving
waters,
moving their meaninglessness on (not *in*) the
moving of the
waters
(which feels tugged)(the rows of scripting
[even though it's a trick] adamant with
self-unfolding)

If Graham were a god, in her Eden every sand grain would be a preposition and every leaf a verb: her later poetry has tried to map the world in as many words as it takes ("What do you think I've been about all this/ long time,/ half-crazed, pen-in-hand, . . . taking it down,/ taking it *all* down"). There's a mania in such passion, the experience dwarfed by the infinity of words needed to describe it. As her means have become all-too-frenzied ends, this Sunday phenomenology has made her poems seem coercive and bizarre.

So then it's sun in surf-breaking water:
incircling, smearing: mind not
knowing if it's still "wave," breaking on
itself, small glider, or if it's "amidst" (red
turning feathery)
or rather "over" (the laciness of foambreak)
or just *what*—(among
the line of also smearingly reddening terns
floating out now
on the feathery backedge of foambroken
looking)—*it is.*

Punctuation can barely keep up with the Heraclitean flux (you try to step into this river twice and you *drown*)—the point of seeing gets lost in the attempt to catch its least mental nuance, its tiniest sensory quaver. Graham's poems are increasingly like the incessant doodles of a patient in a mad ward, all that energy and meticulous observation grinding toward nothing.

Graham's most devoted critic, Helen Vendler (who has dragged the whole Graham bandwagon at times), believes that poetry is a "structural and rhythmic enactment," that mimetic accuracy is "the virtue, the fundamental ethics, of art." Graham's poetry shows how crippling that notion can be—pursued as the highest value, it creates an art that cannot escape its dreary miming gestures. When poetry records only the trivial blizzard of experience, it offers the chaos of act without the order of interpretation.

Never is immersed in a natural world under threat of extinction; but the second-by-second observation (and the endless observation of her own observation) makes the subject not nature but that part of nature named Jorie Graham. As the nagging minutiae pile up, the reader may dimly

5 *Never*, by Jorie Graham; Ecco, 113 pages, $22.95.

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remember that Graham began as a poet very different. A few poems here, written on public commission, revert to the style that made *Erosion* (1983) and *The End of Beauty* (1987) such bewitching performances. There are lines of natural description more sensuous than pages of her nervous pulse-taking, with its now familiar arsenal of brackets and parentheses—Graham is armed to the teeth with colons and italics and academe's weapon of mass terror, scare quotes.

Even these commissions lapse into manic running commentary (as if Narcissus had been hired by the Nature Channel); but they drive toward the quasi-religious awe her poems were once imbued with, instead of the paper-shuffling bureaucracy they have become. Graham has worked so hard to question the authority of the poetic voice she has lost her own authority—poems about writing a poem seem meant for readers too dumb to realize that poems have an author and the author has a pen:

> this voice which is called "I" will say to you:
> now:
> now: [can you do *that?*]: now: [do you feel it]
> [there in
>
> your face, in your palms]: *now*: [doesn't it still
> you][put
> birdchatter in][put dusk-wind in olive groves
> "below"]: now:
>
> we are done we are alone we are a dialect but
> it can still be
> spoken: there is a literal edge: now: there are
>
> facts, too, yes: now: where were we.

Graham's poems are often a tour de force; but their blowsy logorrhea, their hydraulic overuse of words, explain why a poetry of such grand (and even seductive) ambition can seem so fragile and incoherent. Like a Laocoön coiled not in snakes but in his own intestines, she shows how stultified, how barren, a poet can become when she high-mindedly makes an art with all the false starts and second thoughts (and third thoughts) left in.

Guttural howls and curdled shouts echo through Geoffrey Hill's *The Orchards of Syon,*[6] the latest in the crabbed monologues that began with *The Triumph of Love* (1998) and continued in *Speech! Speech!* (2000). Hill is a cryptic, sphinxlike poet (his admirers sometimes seem like members of a cult), whose gloomy grandeur and soiled understandings are half-forgotten here—we are offered instead the frustrated thumping of a Prospero abandoning his magics, a man sentenced to death (looking toward the full stop at the end of his sentences) and composing his valediction.

The Orchards of Syon takes comfort in childhood memory and the reeking intensities of British landscape. The orchards may be those of the promised land, but they live too in those of Syon House on the Thames, where Henry VIII's casket burst open on its progress from London, leaving his corpse to be gnawed by household terriers. In the double realm of Hill's poetry, past rises into present like an unbidden ghost and present sinks into the mire of the past—in *Mercian Hymns* (1971), King Offa still ruled the modern Midlands. Here, Donne is said to have "heard voices he preserved on wax/ cylinders" and the three magi appear in a chain store (as, indeed, they do in Christmas crèches—the literal is often miraculous). It is a matter of belief, for a boy born in Bromsgrove: "I/ wish greatly to believe: that Bromsgrove/ was, and is, Goldengrove: that the Orchards/ of Syon stand as I once glimpsed them./ But there we are: the heartland remains/ heartless—that's the strange beauty of it."

In these monologues, meditation turns obsession into motif: the *Orchards* returns again and again to the ideal past of Goldengrove (from Hopkins' "To a Young Child"); to Dante's Wood of the Suicides (*Inferno* XIII); to the word *Atemwende* (a

6 *The Orchards of Syon*, by Geoffrey Hill; Counterpoint, 77 pages, $24.

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coinage of Paul Celan's—breath-hitch, catch-breath); to Calderon's play *La vida es sueño* ("Life is a dream"); to the deathscapes of World War I, the war that still troubles Hill, though settled before he was born.

Hill is aware of his belated status—the allusion and obscurity of high modernism have long been derogated and suspect. There is no excuse for the blind alleys into which these poems lead, their difficulties making even the sympathetic reader tear his hair.

Achilles

from *Ajax*: power-loss imminent, the split
voice-tube welts blood. Dead Tragedy
threatening,
death of Comedy is perhaps a worse
dereliction. Strophe after strophe
ever more catastrophic. Did I say
strophe? I meant salvo, sorry.

On first reading (and second, and third), this seems like babble; but in modern warfare notions of tragedy that honored the dead in the *Iliad,* honored the individual battles of Achilles and Ajax, are impossible. The modern poem, strophe by strophe, can catalogue the dead only in their thousands or millions. Even this is a misspeaking, and to say strophes instead of salvos merely congealed tact. (The wordplay is learned—in Greek a strophe is a turning, a catastrophe an overturning.) There is no excuse for such difficulties, except Hill's forlorn hope that his poetry might escape the travesties of an age where all public speech is suspect.

Hill rails at his critics ("I'm/ ordered to speak plainly, let what ís/ speak for itself, not to redeem the time/ but to get even with it"), making direct appeal to readers ("Don't look it up this time; the sub-/ conscious does well by us"), as if he were Luther translating the Bible into the vernacular. But Hill would be delusional not to realize his poetry is beyond the reach of the common reader, or even most uncommon ones. Beyond the tags from half-a-dozen languages, *The Orchards of Syon* assumes a knowledge of the cleric Thomas Bradwardine, of a scrap of *Job* that appears as a chapter title in *Moby-Dick*, of the influence of Richard Jefferies on Henry Williamson, of the bridges and canals of James Brindley and the coin presses of Matthew Boulton, and much other arcana. The diction reaches from the fixed past to the fluid and temporary present of cell phones, refuseniks, and rap cassettes. A reader must know that Silvertown was the set, on a ranch outside Los Angeles, where hundreds of westerns were born.

Amid the disordered lines of rant and reprisal, there are scattered passages of physical beauty (a beauty Hill sometimes resents and winces at):

Distant flocks merge into limestone's half-light.
The full moon, now, rears with unhastening
speed,
sketches the black ridge-end, slides thin lustre
downward aslant its gouged and watered scree.

The Orchards of Syon is the testament of a poet nearing the end of life, a poet who has earned the reader's trust by long careful mistrust of his own words. If there is no consolation in this contemplation of the grave, there is no self-pity, either. These monologues have been a preposterous, irritating, and baffling addition to the work of the major poet of our laggard age. Their fraught understandings of guilt, and grace, have been rivalled in the last century only by Eliot's *Four Quartets*. I was not kind to *Speech! Speech!* when I reviewed it, and I must now eat my words, or a few of them. Such poems are proud of their disfigured guise, their diseased violence in language. (Middle-class matrons and shipping clerks won't be setting up Geoffrey Hill societies any time soon.) If there are critics to labor over these poems as they have over Eliot and Pound, the deep shafts of footnotes will gradually mine their subliminal hurts and sublime graces.

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Books

The art & life of Dostoevsky

by Gary Saul Morson

Fashions of literary criticism seem to have a half-life of about ten years. Interestingly enough, through all the changes of schools and approaches, the biography of writers has continued to compel an undiminished interest. Read not only by literature professors but also by interested nonprofessional readers, the lives of novelists rival in popularity the great novels themselves.

What sustains this interest? At times, something resembling high-level gossip is at work, as we learn of the sex lives, foibles, jealousies, and petty actions of the great. Or biographers indulge the desire to take the writer down a peg or two by "explaining" his achievements as the product of some psychopathology, as a mere apology for some heinous social practice, or as the predictable result of shoddy intellectual influences. Such explanations fail to convince, because there are always many people who suffer from a given complex, want to apologize for some aspect of their society, or read the currently influential thinkers, but very few respond with *Pride and Prejudice*, *Crime and Punishment*, or *War and Peace*. The *gap* between the ordinary facts of a life and the amazing artistic accomplishment remains. The real problem of biography is to bridge this gap. That goal is ultimately unreachable, but some accounts go further than others. Joseph Frank's five-volume biography of Dostoevsky, completed with the present contribution,[1] does as well or better than any I have ever read. It is far and away the best comprehensive account of a Russian writer.

The basic facts of Dostoevsky's life were by no means ordinary and were already a legend while he lived. His readers all knew, for instance, that he had, as a youth, been arrested for participation in a socialist discussion group, spent months in the dungeons of the Peter and Paul Fortress, and then been told he was to be executed. Led out to the Senate Square to face a firing squad, he and other prisoners were given last rites and offered blindfolds. Turning to one of his fellow conspirators, Dostoevsky, who was a believer, promised that "today we will be in paradise"; but his companion, an atheist and materialist, mocked all such hopes by scornfully intoning, "a handful of dust!" At the last possible moment, however, an imperial courier galloped up to report that, in his infinite mercy, Tsar Nicholas, Emperor of All the Russias, had commuted their sentence to a term of Siberian imprisonment. Can one wonder at the psychopathology of Dostoevsky's characters when one reflects that the mock execution had been planned in advance as a part of the punishment?

Dostoevsky never ceased to reflect on those moments when he was fully convinced that he was about to die. In *The Idiot*, the

1 *Dostoevsky: The Mantle of the Prophet, 1871–1881*, by Joseph Frank; Princeton University Press, 812 pages, $35.00.

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hero repeatedly asks us to imagine the sequence of thoughts of a man being led to execution. After one such lengthy description, he observes that perhaps there exists some man who has actually endured this torture and then been pardoned at the last minute—"he, perhaps, could tell us about it." As every reader of this novel knew, there was such a man and he was telling us.

Readers were also well aware that Dostoevsky had served four years in a Siberian prison camp under horrific conditions, an experience described in fictional form in his *Notes from the House of the Dead*. In Siberia he renounced his socialist convictions. That way of thinking now seemed terribly out of touch with the real life of the Russian people, who, it turned out, were nothing like "the Parisian mob" that radicals imagined. Dostoevsky recalled that for four years he was never alone. He came to appreciate the importance of privacy and free choice, even irrational choice, for one's fundamental human nature. A life in which everything is chosen for one, whether as paradise or punishment, cannot be one's own life, and one's humanity will sooner or later rebel against it. He repeatedly compared socialist society, if it could be achieved, to an ant-heap. Upon his return to European Russia, Dostoevsky grew increasingly politically incorrect. Radical young readers found it especially hard to forgive him for *The Devils*, which is now usually regarded as the greatest political novel every written. It satirizes liberals and revolutionaries and, as we now know, accurately predicted what totalitarianism would be like.

Dostoevsky was also known to be an epileptic who saw visions of eternal harmony during his seizures. In the moment before the fit, he sometimes experienced a joy so intense that, as the epileptic hero of *The Idiot* observes, "for such a moment one would give one's whole life. . . . This must be the very moment that was not long enough for a drop of water to fall from Mohamed's picture though the epileptic prophet had time to gaze upon all the habitations of Allah." As if all these biographical facts did not provide enough intensity, Dostoevsky was also a compulsive gambler, who, like the hero of his novella "The Gambler," could not resist the metaphysical jolt of perhaps transforming his entire condition with a few turns of the roulette wheel. Gambling, like socialism, seemed to promise absolute freedom but actually led to complete enslavement.

All these features of Dostoevsky's life are described in detail in Frank's biography, so that we appreciate both the legend and the rather more complex reality behind it. Those joyous moments of epilepsy left Dostoevsky so disoriented that he often could not remember where he was and did not recover for days. He could forget his own novels and read them almost as if someone else had written them. In Frank's final volume, we see Dostoevsky trying to persuade idealistic youth, who had lately given up utilitarian nihilism for radical populism based on Christian values, that Christian values could only be sustained with actual Christian belief. One such youth was his proofreader Timofeeva, whose memoirs conjure up an amazing portrait of what it was like to work for Dostoevsky, with his outbursts of temper and his sense of guilt for such misbehavior, his basic kindness and his frenetic devotion to ideas. He hated fanaticism fanatically, and Timofeeva describes him pounding on his desk and proclaiming, "like a mullah in his minaret," that soon there will be an end to all this liberal talk because the Antichrist is coming. She did not know what to make of such pronouncements: were they the sign of an imminent epileptic seizure?

The last decade of Dostoevsky's life, as described by Frank, saw Dostoevsky at his best and his worst. He was at his best when he wrote *The Brothers Karamazov*, so often considered the finest novel ever written. His worst is present in two ways: in an unsuccessful novel, *The Raw Youth*, and in some repellent journalism. Frank is at his best in explaining why the novel failed. In order to persuade radical youth to become Chris-

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tians, Dostoevsky published *The Raw Youth* in one of their journals as a "Trojan horse": it was designed to show them that their own populist convictions should lead them to adopt the faith of the common people. The trouble was that, publishing in a radical journal, Dostoevsky restrained himself, and the novel suffered. One hallmark of Dostoevsky's greatness is that both his plots and his characters' psychology are fused with ideology: one character memorably says that he can "feel ideas." As a result, the most surprising sequence of events makes sense since it follows the inner logic of ideological pathology. But in this novel, Dostoevsky distorted or had to conceal the ideological element. He wound up resorting to utterly shopworn plot devices—secret letters, eavesdropping, etc.—and so the book's best passages seem to hang in the air. Just because it was a Trojan horse, the novel was wooden.

Dostoevsky was also at his worst in journalistic pronouncements concerning foreign policy. As if he had been infected by the same madness as some of his characters, he concluded that History, like one of his own novels, was about to reach a shocking denouement. The final battle between good and evil was imminent, and then (as soon as Russia occupied Constantinople) the kingdom of God would begin, with universal love and reconciliation of all peoples. Unfortunately, a vast conspiracy was trying to prevent such an outcome. Dostoevsky hesitated whether the Antichrist was the Pope or Disraeli. The former represented the ideas of Catholicism and socialism, which for Dostoevsky were two versions of the same view of man as happiest without free choice. The latter led the Jewish attempt to destroy Christian love with a lifeless materialism. Most biographers and critics have ignored these very unpleasant facts of Dostoevsky's last decade, and the few who have discussed them have done so crudely. Frank manages to analyze even Dostoevsky's most awful anti-Semitic statements without for a moment losing sight of his literary genius and even his deep humanitarianism. He allows us to comprehend the sources of Dostoevsky's contradictions.

Frank's basic way of closing the gap between life and work is through what he calls a "condensed intellectual history." This method would not work for most writers—I can't imagine applying it to Jane Austen, for instance—but Russian life at this period was ideologically saturated and Dostoevsky seemed to live every moment in terms of the "accursed questions." Consider the story of how he met his second wife. Dostoevsky had been trying to remarry, but he was attracted to strong, independent women. They were mostly atheist radicals and would have nothing to do with this pious older man, who was, in addition, indebted, difficult, and epileptic. As it happens, he had, in exchange for an advance, signed a contract with an unscrupulous publisher to provide a novel by a certain date; the forfeit provisions, on which the publisher counted, would have ruined him. One month before the deadline, he realized he could not finish *Crime and Punishment* in time. He seized on the suggestion that he employ someone trained in the new "science" of stenography and dictate a novel off the top of his head.

The stenographer's memoirs describe the weird first impression Dostoevsky made: "But it was his eyes that really struck me. They weren't alike—one was dark-brown, while the other had a pupil so dilated that you couldn't see the iris at all." She did not know that Dostoevsky had recently fallen during an epileptic seizure and injured one eye. The key moment of their meeting came when Dostoevsky offered her a cigarette and she refused. Given the ideological codes of the day, which gave political meaning to every aspect of daily behavior, a nihilist had to smoke: so if she did not, then this woman might even believe in God! In fact, she did, and Dostoevsky had at last found an independent woman who was not an atheist. He completed the novel on time and married the stenographer.

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Many biographers have told the story of Dostoevsky's marrying his stenographer, but only Frank has noticed the significance of the cigarette. His constant method is not to dwell on the ordinary facts of biography and then somehow cross over to a great novel, but rather to center on the ideology of Dostoevsky's milieu, the idea-saturated world in which he and his characters lived, and then discuss both the life and the art in these terms. As a result, we grasp all sorts of perplexing actions of his life that would otherwise have seemed merely idiosyncratic, and we see the larger significance of many perplexing moments of his fiction and journalism.

This approach demands a condensed history of Russian thought, not only in its broad outlines, but even in its yearly changes. When Dostoevsky undertook the editorship of a conservative journal, *The Citizen*, he informed one colleague of his ideological purpose: "My idea is that Socialism and Christianity are opposites." Most readers, including myself, have bypassed this statement, inasmuch as it had long been a commonplace, among both Christians and socialists, that the two were antithetical. Frank points out, however, that a comment not worth making a few years earlier had by this time acquired a new meaning, since the young populists had recently begun to claim that the two ways of thinking were indeed compatible. Only by recreating the changing ideological winds of the culture can one appreciate the point of many such comments, and only Frank has had the patience and insight to follow Dostoevsky and his contemporaries through all the twists and turns of Russian life.

Of course, no amount of detail will account for the products of sheer genius, like the legend of the Grand Inquisitor, the central chapter of *The Brothers Karamazov* and arguably Dostoevsky's greatest achievement. But as Frank traces the progress of Dostoevsky's thought, we see, if not how Dostoevsky made such a leap, at least where he was leaping from. Someone provokes Dostoevsky with an argument he finds dangerous, and he replies more thoroughly than necessary; in retrospect, we can see the beginnings of an idea that he later developed in the Inquisitor legend. Frank notes each of these as they happen and so we have a sort of window on the author's emerging thought, tending in directions even he did not yet foresee.

Ivan Karamazov's Inquisitor legend, it will be recalled, describes how, in the time of the Spanish Inquisition, Jesus, moved by pity for those who thirst for the Second Coming, decides to make a brief visit to earth. Although everyone recognizes Him, the common people do nothing when the Grand Inquisitor orders His arrest. Visiting Him in his cell, the Inquisitor outlines how he and the Church (and in an anachronistic implication, the socialists of later centuries) have completely rejected the essence of Jesus's message and presented as Christian teaching what is in fact its opposite. For Jesus came to make men free, so they can *choose* good in a world of radical uncertainty where they cannot even be sure what good is, where they are bound to make mistakes and suffer guilt, and where they must grope in the dark "with only Thy image as a guide." Choice involves risk, guessing, insecurity: this is what freedom really is.

But man, the Inquisitor contends, does not want to be free: he wants certainty and security, not only material but also spiritual. He needs to know that his beliefs are true and his actions the right ones. Jesus should therefore have accepted the three temptations of the devil, should have agreed to "turn stones into bread" precisely *because* "man does not live by bread alone." For bread—material power—is something certain, and so, ironically enough, the attraction of materialism is itself spiritual. The Inquisitor tells the silent Jesus: The Church has therefore "corrected Thy work" and, out of love for mankind, has accepted the devil's temptations because they, and not freedom, will make people happy. The Inquisitor is even ready to go to hell for betraying Christ and he therefore claims to outdo him: for Jesus gave his earthly life out of love for hu-

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manity, but the Inquisitor is prepared to give his immortal soul. But is his perverted sacrifice really love, or is it contempt bordering on hatred that somehow emerged from love?

Love of humanity turned to hatred: this is a possibility Dostoevsky had explored earlier when explaining to the socialist youth that love of the people must be based on faith or it runs the risk of being transformed into its opposite. An atheist who loves humanity but who finds he cannot really help it will soon begin to hate it, much as, Dostoevsky writes, parents who helplessly watch their children starve will actually begin to hate them—"precisely because of the *intolerableness* of their suffering. . . . I assert that the realization of one's utter impotence to help, to render service, or to bring alleviations to suffering mankind, coupled with one's complete conviction of the existence of that suffering can even *transform the love of humanity in your heart into hatred for humanity*."

Or consider another sketch, which also led to the Inquisitor legend. In 1876, Dostoevsky was amused both by the Russian craze for spiritualism (communication with the dead by séances) and with the attempt of Russian skeptics, like the chemist Dmitri Mendeleev, to show that spiritualism was a fraud. The believers were apparently peculiar materialists still craving spiritual meaning and thus weirdly conceiving of spirit as another kind of matter; Mendeleev labored under the delusion that anyone who could entertain such beliefs would be dissuaded by logic. Dostoevsky chose to focus on one skeptic's observation that these devils must be fake because any genuine devil would prove his reality by giving us inventions we do not already have, whereas these devils just repeat things that everyone knows. Adopting his most whimsical tone, Dostoevsky claims that this charge against the devils is unwarranted, because only very stupid devils would shower us with inventions. If they did, after all, we would soon reach that perfect materialist utopia of which our socialists dream, in which everything would be provided for us. The problem is that our joy at such an outcome would hardly last, because with everything provided there would be nothing to strive for; we could not show our love for others by sacrificing our labor for them; we would have lost the essence of our humanness, which consists in making choices in a world of uncertainty so that our efforts actually matter: "happiness lies not in happiness but in its pursuit." This emphasis on freedom and risk as definitive of the human, on happiness as a process rather than a gift: here is another idea that will shape the Inquisitor legend.

By such means, Frank prepares us for Dostoevsky's greatest accomplishments. Strangely enough, though, our knowledge of where the strokes of genius came from turns out only to increase our wonder at them. Dostoevsky himself never tired of arguing that one can know everything about a person and still not be able to predict what he will do next; and if the situation could be repeated, the same person in the same circumstances might do something else. There is nothing inevitable about human actions. All the more so with great achievements: Frank is well aware that, though we may have all the building blocks for *Karamazov*, the novel exceeds everything that led up to it.

Where Eagletons dare

Terry Eagleton
The Gatekeeper: A Memoir.
St. Martin's Press, 128 pages, $21.95

reviewed by Paul Dean

"I can't see," Sir Frank Kermode is quoted as saying on the back cover of *The Gatekeeper*, "how this book could fail to amuse." In that case I will have to tell him. It can fail because, despite containing many genuinely funny, and some touching, moments, its lack of amiability becomes ultimately distasteful. Terry Eagleton's progress from a poor working-class childhood in the north of England to a chair of English at Oxford is an admirable achievement, but the chip has never been dislodged from his shoulder.

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As a boy he was gatekeeper to a convent of Carmelite nuns, and the symbol of privileged access to an enclosed world governs the book; when Cambridge offers him an undergraduate place, the roles are reversed and "the gatekeeper had let me in." Did membership of the elite give him a bad conscience? To the inevitable question, how a supposed radical could contentedly occupy an Oxford professorship for so long, he gives no answer. Instead he offers unwitting proof of his own observation that "Oxbridge colleges . . . have an infantilizing effect on their longer-term inmates, reducing them to a state of querulous narcissism." Catholic by birth, Marxist by conversion, he has abandoned formal profession of both faiths as too idealistic. "What governs our lives for the most part," he pronounces, "is the given, the habitual, the sheer inertia of history, circumstance, inheritance." Yet the fatalism is uneasy, just as the attempts at "wit" in the manner of his hero, Oscar Wilde, are largely devoid of Wilde's charity or tenderness. He specializes in the far-fetched simile, of which there are two or three to a page. Whether they are apt, or even entertaining, doesn't seem to matter; the point is to keep producing them mechanically.

Eagleton grew up in Salford—a city abutting the northern borders of Manchester, in whose university he now teaches. As he points out, Salford, while grim, was not entirely devoid of cultural figures. The painter L. S. Lowry, the playwright Shelagh Delaney, the folk-singer Ewan MacColl, the novelist Walter Greenwood, the actor Albert Finney, the composer Peter Maxwell Davies, the film-maker Mike Leigh, all hail from there. Eagleton thinks the odds are against intellectuals in a working-class environment suspicious of ideas. Yet we learn from the recently published study by Jonathan Rose, *The Intellectual Life of the British Working Classes* (Yale, 2001), which looks set to become a classic, that MacColl, who by the age of fifteen had read Dante, Kant, Darwin, Gogol, and Dostoevsky among much else, experienced a struggle of conscience as a member of the Young Communist League, the Workers' Theatre Movement, and a band called The Red Megaphones. The scripts and lyrics he was performing seemed patronizing: "I resented people who talked about us as 'you people' or 'the workers.' I felt reduced, as if my identity was being taken away." The "endless sloganizing," with its inhuman leveling tendency, troubled him. Eagleton writes trenchantly on his own time as a left-wing activist, observing the illogicality of revolutionary policies being propounded by people with impeccable middle-class credentials, the sheer unreality of fanaticism and dogma, the abundance of "purism, arrogance, overhastiness, tunnel vision" among the ideologues, yet can still insist that "Revolutionaries . . . are neither optimists nor pessimists, but realists"—which, he thinks, is why they are so few in number. It seems not to trouble him that literary theory, of which he has been a leading exponent, might be a variety of such "realism." Jonathan Rose supplies page after page of haunting vignettes—millworkers listening to a lecture on the lieder of Hugo Wolf, the engineer with a passion for opera, drinkers in a back-street pub forming an audience for live singing of Offenbach. These socialists of an earlier generation make Eagleton's political credentials look pretty shallow. Neville Cardus, a Manchester working-class boy, recorded pointedly that when he and his friends talked the night away it was "not to air our economic grievances, not to 'spout' politics and discontent, but to relieve the ferment of our minds or emotions after the impact of *Man and Superman*, *Elektra*, *Riders to the Sea*, *Pelléas and Mélisande*, *Scheherazade*, *Prince Igor*."

The point about these people is that, without compromising their political beliefs, they understood that the major purpose of the arts is to sustain and nourish, to give vision and hope. There is little sign that Eagleton understands this. He is what he calls Sartre, "the media's idea of an intellectual," who has earned his living "peddling ideas to the masses." The depth of his inter-

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est in those ideas, in the literature which explores them, or in the masses to whom he dispenses them, is hard to gauge. Almost all his references to his teaching, whether in England or America, contain sneers at the stupidity of his pupils. About his own teachers at Cambridge he is openly scornful and spiteful, permitting himself such phrases as "disgusting old misogynist . . . supremely trivial-minded," "emotional desperado," or "erudite brat." He disdains their eccentricity, which he dismisses as "a fancy word for outrageous egotism." Eventually there is a shriek of rage at these old-style dons: "Petulant, snobbish, spiteful, arrogant, autocratic and ferociously self-centred, they were a pretty squalid bunch." Could it be that they refused to take him at his own valuation? Yet to some of them, at least, he owes his chances in life.

Other reviewers have found the "Dons" chapter hilarious. I find it disgusting. What gives Eagleton the right to this kind of tone? What are *his* claims to respect as a critic? A clutch of books on Marxism, ideology, cultural politics, and nineteenth-century Irish literary history is, after all, pretty small beer, some of it perilously near the bottom of the barrel. Worse, in promoting the abandonment of thought which constitutes literary theory, he has connived at the destruction of British higher education. Worst of all, one has the suspicion that he has done this as a kind of *act*, a malicious form of diversion. His half-dozen impressive pages here on Wittgenstein are in quite a different key, and show that he is no fool, although he remains, I feel, a clever schoolboy embarrassed by his own intelligence and perversely determined to misuse it to *épater les bourgeois*.

His account of his disagreement with his Cambridge supervisor over Tragedy (the topic of one of his final examination papers) reveals significant undercurrents in his personality. The don clung to the idea that Greek tragedy represented the acme of the genre and that Ibsen or Tennessee Williams, for instance, fell short of it. "Modern tragedy," to him, was a contradiction in

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terms. Eagleton disagreed, as well he might. But what can he mean to imply by his next comment, "I thought tragedy was a bad thing, whereas he thought it was a good one"? Does Eagleton find no cogency in the argument that *literary* tragedy can legitimately give pleasure? Nobody denies that real-life tragedy is a bad thing—certainly not the don, as we see a few pages later, when it falls to him to break the news that Eagleton's father has died during his son's absence in Cambridge to sit the scholarship examination. Further, the don "also assumed that tragedy was always a deeper affair than comedy." Is that not too neat an antithesis? Whose comedy is more heart-breaking than Beckett's, for instance?

There are reasons for Eagleton's discomfort. Despite having failed to gain a scholarship, he was offered an undergraduate place. Compassion was not a motive, he insists: his supervisor was a man of strict probity. Yet his gratitude was mingled with resentment: "His world was the Law which had brought my father to his ruin, but it was a Law which my father was asking me to love." This refers back to some earlier remarks on tragedy and the unattractiveness, as Eagleton sees it, of the concept of the sacrificial victim. His father, who had had to forgo a place at grammar school because his family could not afford the fees, was a scapegoat: "he sacrificed himself for his children, but that made him precisely not a model to emulate." His inarticulacy made him remote and enigmatic; his terror of emotional display made him hard and apparently unloving. Yet Eagleton, who admits to excessive fluency and is certainly not shy of expressing, if not emotions, at least feelings, is sure that his father loved him. His academic success has been an act both of reparation and of revenge. That, perhaps, helps to explain the peculiar combination of wistfulness and vindictiveness in his tone, particularly when he comes to write of male authority figures. It makes for an unsettling book, which deserves a subtler reaction than the amusement of Professor Kermode.

To the shores of Tripoli

Max Boot The Savage Wars of Peace: Small Wars and the Rise of American Power. Basic Books, 448 pages, $30

reviewed by Robert Messenger

If this book can be said to have heroes and villains, the heroes are the Marines and the villains the one-dimensional army thinkers like William Westmoreland and Colin Powell whose strategies have been a disaster for American arms and prestige. Max Boot, the editorial features editor of *The Wall Street Journal*, has examined the limited wars that dominate American military history and are the rule to which the Civil War, the two World Wars, and Korea are the exceptions. These limited wars can be variously termed, among other things, counterinsurgencies, sublimited wars, low-intensity conflicts, or the wonderful new coinage "military operations other than war," but Mr. Boot settles on "small wars" (the actual translation of the Spanish "*guerilla*").

In the post-Civil War era, the Marine Corps, which had existed in various forms since 1775, gained a motto, a march, and a mission. The government was beginning to take an interest in the Caribbean and the Pacific, and troops were needed to help stabilize some very unstable countries. The missions tended to take four basic forms: punitive raids or campaigns, protection of Americans or American interests in a foreign country, the pacification of rebellious and marauding populations, and the annexation of land or trade concessions (Mr. Boot calls this last item "profiteering" to maintain the alliteration). Between 1898 and 1940, Marines fought "small wars" in China, the Philippines, Cuba, the Dominican Republic, Haiti, Nicaragua, Panama, in some cases more than once and often on a long-term basis—four decades in China, for instance. These assignments earned the Marines the nickname of "State Department troops." But they were very good at them and proud enough of their achievements to cite the

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motto "Can Do" to go along with "Semper Fidelis." The Marine Corps's own *Small Wars Manual* (1940) notes that "Small wars represent the normal and frequent operations of the Marine Corps." (This is not to forget or undervalue the U.S. army's campaign in Mexico against Pancho Villa in 1916–17 and the troops committed to the Russian Civil War from 1918–1920, both of which are featured in the book.)

One of Mr. Boot's key points is to refute the idea that U.S. intervention was to protect business interests at the expense of legitimate states. He shows that the United States generally landed in the countries with the least U.S. investment and the most instability—ones generally threatened by insurgencies and coups—hardly good places to do business. The United States tended also to employ a supremely effective variation of the carrot and the stick: the U.S. troops not only fought a bold and sometimes vicious campaign against the insurgents, but also built roads, hospitals, sewer systems, schools, and a general healthier and more prosperous life for those who gave up fighting. Mr. Boot shows that in these countries the United States was generally what stood between chaos or despotism and the reasonable rule of law. The United States was heavily criticized for its intervention in Haiti in 1915. Yet in reality U.S. troops were what kept out the dictators. In nineteen years of occupation, the Marines built 1,000 miles of roads, 210 bridges, 9 airfields, 11 hospitals, 147 clinics, etc. As Mr. Boot points out, "Having arrived in Haiti to the sound of gunfire, they left to the tune of the Marine Corps anthem, belted out by the Garde d'Haiti band."

The 1940 *Small Wars Manual* seems to stand as a marking point in U.S. military policy. It came out just as we were to embark on our largest and most successful war. The victory in World War II heralded a new way of waging war and led many to refer to total war as the "American Way of War." But as we went forward, the tactics and strategy that won against Germany and Japan failed us. As the manual points out, small wars are ambiguous assignments, "to establish and maintain law and order by supporting or replacing the civil government in countries or areas in which the interests of the United States have been placed in jeopardy." This is, moreover, to be done "with the minimum of troops, in fact, with nothing more than a demonstration of force if that is all that is necessary and reasonably sufficient." The Marine Corps was remarkably successful at small-war fighting with a minimum of troops—except during the World Wars, the Marines never numbered more than 20,000 total and often less than 10,000. But the lessons of the successful "small wars" were forgotten in the Cold War.

Our bumbling and bungling war in Indochina is a familiar story. Mr. Boot focuses on the failures of military strategy. And General Westmoreland must shoulder this burden, not only for trying to fight a counterinsurgency with total-war tactics, but also for failing to have the imagination to see his failures and adjust. It used to be that the American genius was for getting things right in the end. We might be unprepared but our native skills for improvisation and innovation would see us through. Our general command staff in Vietnam fought like a stack of Prussians who never thought, but only did. Mr. Boot's analysis of Vietnam post-Westmoreland is excellent, and he rightly points out that the U.S. troops under Creighton Abrams won the military conflict and pacified the population; they even trained a South Vietnamese army capable of repulsing the Viet Cong with U.S. air and logistical support. But we lost the war at home and so we left our allies to their fate.

It is at this point that our second villain appears: Colin Powell. Mr. Boot quotes Secretary Powell as saying "Many of my generation, the career captains, majors, lieutenant colonels seasoned in [Vietnam], vowed that when our turn came to call the shots, we would not quietly acquiesce in halfhearted warfare for half-baked reasons that the American people could not understand or support." Working under Caspar Weinberger in the 1980s, General Powell

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developed a military doctrine that I would term "Don't Ever Fight." These two secretaries of defense set forth a long sequence of preconditions for employing our troops: no deployment unless it is vital for our national interests, unless we are committed wholeheartedly to winning, unless the military objective is clear, unless there are actual means to the end, unless there is popular and congressional support, and—added later—unless there is an exit strategy. The doctrine also includes the fabulously stupid statement that "finally, the commitment of U.S. forces to combat should be a last resort." Can you think of any war in history that fits all these criteria?

The Powell Doctrine survived three administrations and a number of spectacularly unsuccessful engagements—think Haiti and Somalia. It took two jetliners slamming into the World Trade Center for its core assumptions to be challenged. (It is interesting that the most passive military doctrine since appeasement was undone not by Blitzkrieg-like fighting, but by men wielding box cutters.)

Mr. Boot's analysis is very compelling and sensible. The only possible criticism of the book is that the narrative of the many small campaigns the United States waged in the years before Vietnam is presented without enough context and with an over-reliance on the biographies of a few colorful individuals from Stephen Decatur and David Porter to Fighting Fred Funston and Smedley Butler. It is the nature of a general history to do so, but I still wish Mr. Boot had fleshed out the stories and given readers a larger sense of such issues as the American refusal to build an empire in the eighteenth century even after losing trade opportunites to such acts as the Dutch colonization of Sumatra. But it seems churlish to make any complaints. *The Savage Wars of Peace* is an important book, which teaches a real and essential lesson about American foreign policy makers and army generals. May we heed its lessons in the years to come.

Editor's note: Readers are reminded that *The New Criterion* does not publish during July or August. Our next issue will appear in September. Readers are invited to visit *The New Criterion*'s web page at www.newcriterion.com, where we plan to post new material from time to time this summer.

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Notebook

Arrested development

by Theodore Dalrymple

The last time I attended a hanging in the prison it was a murder, not a suicide. I arrived too late to bring the hanged man back to life: for, if there are degrees of deadness, he was by then already very dead.

The cellmate of the hanged man did not so much confess as boast that he had intimidated the dead man into hanging himself. He had threatened to cut his throat in his sleep if he did not hang himself first, and the man, who was two weeks from his release, chose the rope—or rather, the bedsheet torn into strips, dampened and braided into a noose. The cellmate helped him up on to the chair and obligingly kicked it away from under him.

The hanging before last that I attended was complicated by the fact that the dead man had on his chest a small puncture wound that penetrated to his heart, inflicted by the thrust of a ball-point pen, which I had not until then considered a potentially lethal weapon. No explanation of how the man came by this wound was ever forthcoming: but it seems that, even where there is a high illiteracy rate, as in prison, the pen is as mighty as the sword.

There have been many more hangings in my prison since the abolition of the death penalty than there ever were before. It is as if the gods demand human sacrifices, and if the state does not carry them out, the prisoners themselves have to step into the breach in their own amateur fashion. It seems from the statistics that an official execution, with all its attendant solemnity and ceremony, is more pleasing to the gods than three or four suicides and murders. The gods like a little formality.

I suppose it will be granted that sentimentality is unlikely to remain for long the vice of the prison doctor, though cynicism might easily replace it. Sometimes I wonder whether, through constant contact with the sordid, I have or might one day become the "coarse-mouthed Doctor" of *The Ballad of Reading Gaol* who

> . . . gloats and notes
> Each new and nerve-twitched pose,
> Fingering a watch whose little ticks
> Are like horrible hammer-blows

and who later comforts the condemned prisoner thus:

> The Doctor said that Death was but
> A scientific fact.

Irrespective of the ethics of capital punishment, I am glad that among my duties has never been that of pronouncing a man fit for execution: for by what criterion is the doctor supposed to judge? Is the fitness to be thus pronounced physical or mental, a lack of incapacitating anxiety, perhaps? (Albert Pierrepoint, one of the last hangmen of England—a position for which, in the days of judicial hanging, the Home Office used to receive five applications a week, year in,

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year out—wrote in his autobiography that all the condemned men he knew behaved correctly at their execution, save one: "and he," wrote Mr Pierrepoint by way of explanation, "was a foreigner.") The last doctor I met who had examined men for fitness for execution—in a former British colony—was an alcoholic, though I cannot positively say that he was driven to the bottle by a disturbed conscience.

Whenever I enter my prison, I am always accompanied by *The Ballad of Reading Gaol*—not literally, for my own copy, written by Oscar Wilde and published by Leonard Smithers in 1898, is too valuable for me to risk in a congregation of thieves—but mentally. This invariable accompaniment is strange, because Oscar Wilde is not a literary figure I much admire: though brilliantly gifted, he was one of the first authors to prefer the route of publicity and self-promotion to that of achievement, and his actual work paid the price. Not only was he himself ultimately the victim of his own choice, but he was a harbinger of genuine decline to come.

I first heard *The Ballad* read over the radio when I was a child, and its pathos moved me, though I knew nothing of prisons and could not have guessed that I would ever enter one. Wilde was still considered a slightly risqué figure at the time, over whose personal proclivities it was best to draw a veil of silence, and though his works were published and performed, he was not yet the hero and martyr he was soon to become. I remember my father spluttering with outrage at the film made with Peter Finch in the title role of *The Trials of Oscar Wilde*: not at the injustice or cruelty of the eventual sentence, but at the idea that anyone should have thought Wilde innocent or undeserving of his punishment.

My prison belongs, architecturally, to the same era as Reading Gaol. It is of the panopticon type, so that, theoretically speaking, the whole prison could be surveyed from an observation point at its center. The Victorian ironwork is magnificent, and in a happier context would invite admiration; and though the outer aspect of the prison is forbidding, there are features of the gothic revival within. The prisoners still trudge round the exercise yards as depicted in Victorian paintings.

Prison is another country: they do things differently there. I go abroad every time I enter it, and even the sky changes for me. Like a cheap tune whose chorus infects the brain as an insect bores into wood, I recall the lines

> . . . that little tent of blue
> Which prisoners call the sky.

Later in *The Ballad*, the famous line becomes more personal

> . . . that little tent of blue
> We prisoners call the sky.

and the change from the third to the first person reminds me of my own recurring nightmare, in which I am received into the prison not as a doctor, but as a prisoner. I wake up in a sweat: How will I bear the humiliation of it and the need constantly to ask permission of the warders to do even the simplest things? Or will I, like Dr. Ragin of Ward No. 6, who is admitted as a lunatic to his own ward in Chekhov's story of that name, sink into despairing apathy and die for lack of will to live? In fact, educated and intelligent people survive surprisingly well as prisoners, perhaps by detaching themselves from their predicament and observing everything around them in a deliberately unemotional way: but their surprising resilience does not prevent my nightmare from recurring.

Some things have not changed very much since Wilde's days in Her Majesty's penitentiaries. Men who live in the most squalid and litter-strewn parts of our cities are transformed temporarily into fanatics of cleanliness: brass railings are polished over and over until they gleam and glitter.

> We rubbed the doors, and scrubbed the floors,

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And cleaned the shining rails;
And, rank by rank, we soaped the plank,
And clattered with the pails.

It is still as if, in the official mind, a spotless floor and an immaculate railing signified a reformed character: a sound mind in a clean prison, as it were.

Because there are no executions any longer, there is no prisoner who

. . . does not bend his head to hear
The Burial Office read,
Nor, while the anguish of his soul
Tells him he is not dead,
Cross his own coffin, as he moves
Into the hideous shed.

But the execution chamber of my prison is still colloquially known as the Topping Shed, and the (no doubt apocryphal) story is told in the prison of how one of the last prisoners to be executed there was taken from the condemned cell to the gallows, passing a little space of open air en route, and, looking up at the little tent of gray we English call the sky, said to the warders accompanying him, with the banality of finality, "Looks like rain." "It's all right for you," one of them replied, "you're not coming back."

When a prisoner is suicidal, warders may still, as in Wilde's day, be set

Who watch him night and day;
Who watch him when he tries to weep,
And when he tries to pray;
Who watch him lest himself should rob
The prison of its prey.

But it is here that, realistic and truthful as Wilde's lines undoubtedly are, other reflections rise to my mind based upon my own experience: for though Wilde is speaking the truth, it is not the whole truth by any means. His poem is programatic or propagandistic in intent, a clarion call to prison reform in times of indisputable harshness, and nonetheless worthy for that: but reformers are apt to lose sight of Man's fallen nature in their zeal for betterment, and this leads to wilful simplification.

When a man is known in prison to be suicidal, he does not necessarily arouse the compassion of his fellow-prisoners, contrary to Wilde's letter to *The Daily Chronicle* soon after his release, extolling prisoners' "sympathy for each other, their humility, their gentleness, their pleasant smiles of greeting when they meet each other." On the contrary, they will do everything possible to aid a man in his efforts to kill himself, from providing the pills to passing the razor blade. They do this not because they believe in an abstract, Humean right to suicide, or because they have a personal grudge against the person who is suicidal, but because they know that a suicide embarrasses the authorities, and a man's life is a small price to pay for doing this. I recall, for example, a man who had repeatedly cut his wrists and his throat, who was under the direct observation of two warders night and day. It is surprisingly difficult to observe a man constantly without lapses of concentration: and when the man saw that the two warders were temporarily abstracted, he slipped out a razor blade that he had inserted between his gum and his cheek and gashed his throat with it (not fatally, in the event). The razor blade had been passed to him in his food by a well-wishing fellow-prisoner, and he had secreted it in his mouth, to await his opportunity to use it. And prisoners, who usually hang on to their medication as something very precious, are quite prepared to donate it to others in a good cause such as a suicide attempt.

On the night before an execution in Reading Gaol

. . . there is no sleep when men must weep
Who never yet have wept:
So we—the fool, the fraud, the knave—
That endless vigil kept,
And through each brain on hands of pain
Another's terror crept.

Then came the morn of the execution itself:

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With sudden shock the prison-clock
  Smote on the shivering air,
And from all the gaol rose up a wail
  Of impotent despair,
Like the sound that frightened marshes hear
  From some leper in his lair.

But it is different when a man hangs himself in prison: if he is a run-of-the-mill prisoner, the life of the prison continues as if nothing has happened. He disappears like a pebble in a pond, but without the ripples, and he is not spoken of again. If, on the other hand, he is a notorious sex-murderer, as one who hanged himself in my prison not long ago was, news of his death is greeted with triumphant cheers, the entire prison erupts with glee, the building echoes with a joyous percussive chorus of struck metal pipes and railings. If the very same man had been officially executed, his death would have been the object of the despair Wilde describes, because it was the authorities that hanged him: and the despair he describes is therefore that of antinomian solidarity defeated, not a manifestation of humanitarianism. And in *De Profundis*, Wilde's long letter to Bosie from Reading Gaol, he states quite openly that he is "a born antinomian," as if it were something rare and precious, as if he were one of the elect: "I am," he wrote, "one of those who were made for exceptions, not for laws."

The Ballad of Reading Gaol is dedicated to "C. T. W. Sometime Trooper of the Royal Horse Guards. Obiit H.M. Prison, Reading, Berkshire, July 7th, 1896." C. T. W. was Charles Thomas Wooldridge, a soldier who killed his estranged wife in a fit of jealous fury "and so he had to die."

He did not wear his scarlet coat,
  For blood and wine are red,
And blood and wine were on his hands
  When they found him with the dead,
The poor dead woman whom he loved,
  And murdered in her bed.

Wilde heightens the pathos by famously suggesting that we are all, at heart, or potentially, C. T. W.:

Yet each man kills the thing he loves,
  By each let this be heard,
Some do it with a bitter look,
  Some with a flattering word.
The coward does it with a kiss,
  The brave man with a sword!

There is an undoubted humanity in these verses. The murderer is my brother, he is a member of the human race, his passions are human, all too human. Recently in the prison, for example, I spoke for several hours to a murderer who had killed from motives of jealousy. I could not but recall C. T. W. as we spoke, and the man's story aroused my pity. Murder may be the worst of crimes in the eyes of the law, but murderers are often not the worst of criminals.

The man was in his middle age, of previous good and upright character, and had been married for thirty years to the wife he eventually killed. She was a terrible drunkard, whom I had seen, as it happens, several times in my hospital. When drunk, as she was most days, she was unbearable in her shrewishness. She denied that she had ever touched a drop even with a glass of whisky in her hand. She drank so much that she became doubly incontinent. When still capable of some degree of coordination, she was violent, and had stabbed her husband, bitten and scratched him, thrown saucepans at his head. She turned their house into a cesspit, secreted bottles everywhere, and destroyed everything of value by smashing it. Into the bargain, she was intensely jealous, phoning him ten times a day at work, and creating a violent scene at home if he were a minute late from work or shopping.

"For thirty years," he said, "I looked after that woman. I provided for her, I cleaned up after her, I washed away the vomit, I cleaned her, I put her to bed. She couldn't have survived without me."

"Why did you do it?" I asked.

"I loved that woman, I worshipped the ground she stood on."

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At such moments, one has difficulty in understanding what understanding would be: at what point can one say, like Archimedes, "Aha, now I understand!"? My murderer-patient mused on.

"Then she announced one day that she was returning to her first lover. He had become a very rich man. I said, 'You can't do this to me, not after thirty years. I've looked after you for thirty years, and now you're just going to leave me all alone. You've taken thirty years of my life.' She said, 'Well, I'm going anyway.'"

"And so you killed her?"

"I don't remember. I don't remember. But I loved her, and my life is over without her."

Several times before and since, he has tried to end his life. I caught him once with a noose around his neck—he was going blue—and had to wrestle it from him. His self-pity was far greater than his guilt, of course, but his story was nonetheless tragic and pitiable. I congratulated myself for being so sympathetic a listener, and felt the warm glow of rectitude suffuse my being as he thanked me for my kindness to him.

This warm glow is precisely the sensation that Wilde's poem imparts to us, as we compassionate with the wretched and the despised: how broad are our sympathies, how generous our sentiments!

Perhaps not quite broad or generous enough, however: or perhaps they need to be a little more firmly under intellectual control. I have omitted certain details from my account of my murderer: he gouged his wife's eyes out and decapitated her. Likewise, and for precisely the same emotional effect, Wilde, to heighten our sympathy for C. T. W., says he murdered her in her bed. This suggests to us that he suddenly lost control, that he was momentarily overcome by passion, as any of us might be in the right circumstances. But Wooldridge's plea for clemency was turned down because, in actual fact, he did not kill the thing he loved in her bed: he lay in wait for her with a razor at the ready and cut her throat three times. This indicated an unforgivable degree of premeditation, and he was hanged.

One imagines from reading *The Ballad* that Reading Gaol was an insatiable Moloch, waiting to be fed victims, indifferent to the justice of the proceedings. But in the half century of Reading Gaol's existence before Wilde's arrival, there were actually only five executions there: that of Thomas Jennings in 1844, for having poisoned his four-year-old son with arsenic, which he deliberately misled him into thinking was salt; that of John Gould in 1862, for having cut his seven-year-old daughter's throat; that of Henry and Francis Tidbury in 1877 for the joint murder of two policemen; and that of John Carter in 1893, for the murder of his third wife, he being strongly suspected of having murdered his second wife as well. Wilde was "lucky," therefore, at least in the literary sense, to be incarcerated when there was an execution to give power to his poem, for the statistical chances were against it. And in the remaining seventy-one years in which the death penalty was still in force, there were only four further executions at Reading Gaol.

The tragedy of C. T. W. is not that of harsh and rough justice meted out to him: it is that of a man who acted from motives understandable and perhaps even shared by everyone, and yet whose crime had to be expiated for the good of society. Even without the execution, or with a last-minute reprieve, there was no possible happy ending to the all-too-human story: and that, not ill-treatment, is its tragedy.

The power of *The Ballad* is not in its propagandistic or prison-reformist message, therefore, but in its implicit recognition of the frailty and imperfectibility of man. No number of prison reforms would reduce it to a document of merely historical interest. We know that there will still be C. T. W.'s in the best-ordered societies, because man is a fallen creature, and the passion to which C. T. W. succumbed springs eternal, just as the

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need to punish springs eternal. The law ("I know not whether Laws be right,/ Or whether Laws be wrong") can perhaps control or tame such passion a little, but never eliminate it finally: and we would not wish it to if it could, for all the misery it causes. Life can never be unblemished joy, though that is what we should like it to be.

The Ballad occupies a special place in Wilde's oeuvre, of course. It was the last thing he wrote for publication, and the only one after his release from prison. He was a broken man, but was he broken only by the harsh treatment he had received? For a brilliantly gifted man who had moved only in the beau monde of late Victorian England, prison gruel, oakum picking, floor scrubbing, and buckets for excrement must, of course, have been a severe shock. He was used to ceaseless conversation and gaiety, and in prison there was enforced silence; a great reader, he was reduced to one book a week, and that a mere crude religious tract.

But the shock, I suspect, was far deeper than any supplied by physical hardship, serious as this was for him. Only a few months before he went to jail, when he was no mere youth any longer but a man of forty years of age, he had written *Phrases and Philosophies for the Use of the Young*, for an Oxford undergraduate magazine called *Chameleon*. These few maxims were a quintessence of what he claimed to believe, and of the attitudes upon which he had built his glittering career. Here is a sample:

> The first duty in life is to be as artificial as possible.
>
> Wickedness is a myth invented by good people to account for the curious attractiveness of others.
>
> If the poor only had profiles there would be no difficulty in solving the problem of poverty.
>
> Nothing that actually occurs is of the smallest importance.
>
> In all unimportant matters, style, not sincerity is the essential. In all important matters, style, not sincerity, is the essential.
>
> No crime is vulgar, but all vulgarity is crime.
>
> Any preoccupation with ideas of what is right or wrong in conduct shows an arrested intellectual development.

The sheer callow, shallow, spoilt-child silliness of all this—upon the propagation of which the brilliantly gifted Wilde wasted so much of his life and energy and which ruins so much of his work—must have been obvious the very moment he passed through the prison door. Wilde was never a wicked man. It was nevertheless only in prison that he learned the value of truth, sincerity, and goodness, and by then it was too late.

Prison has taught me much also.

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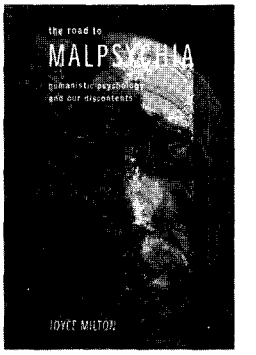
The Road To Malpsychia

Humanistic Psychology and Our Discontents

by Joyce Milton



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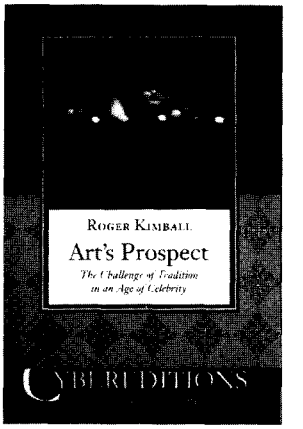

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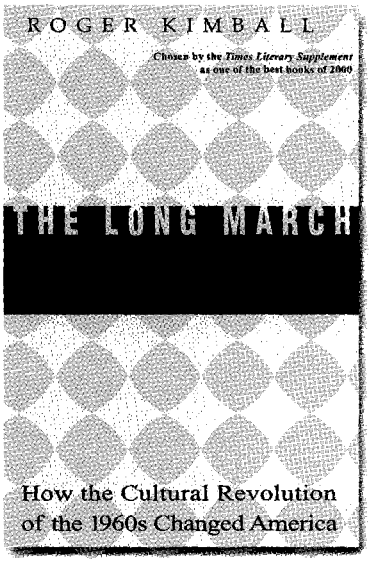
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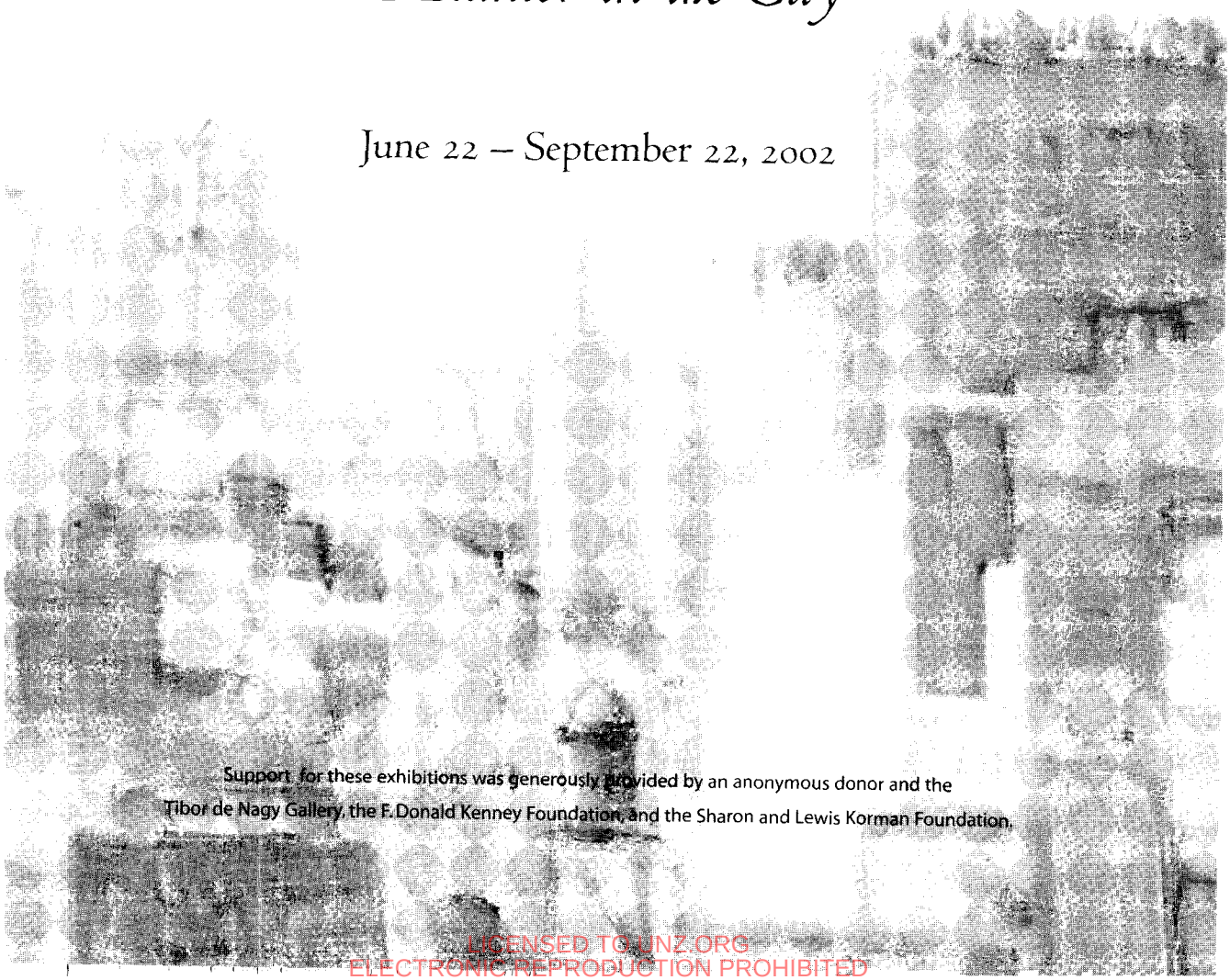

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